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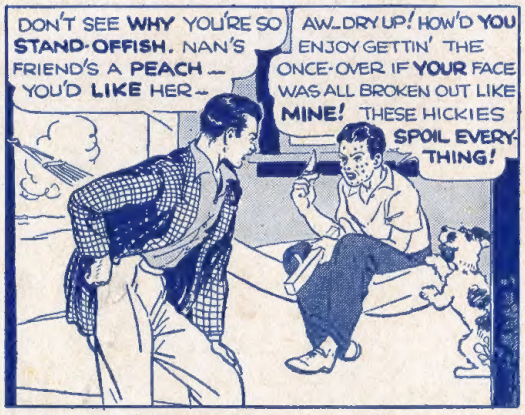

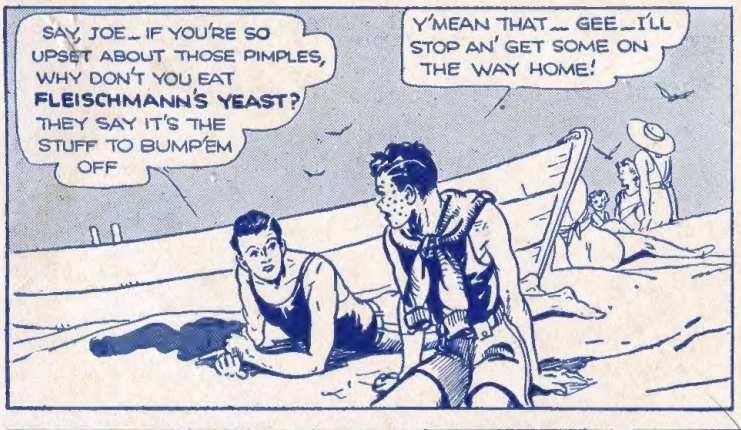

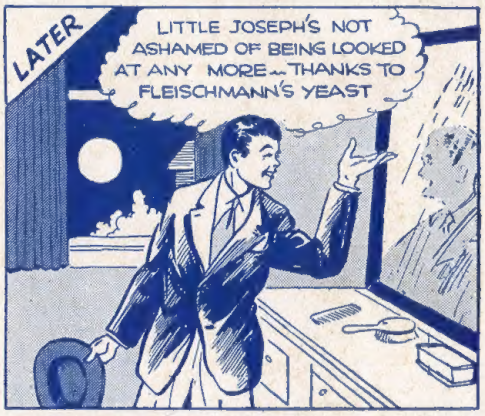

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Vol. X, No. 2 G. B. FARNUM, *Editor* August, 1936

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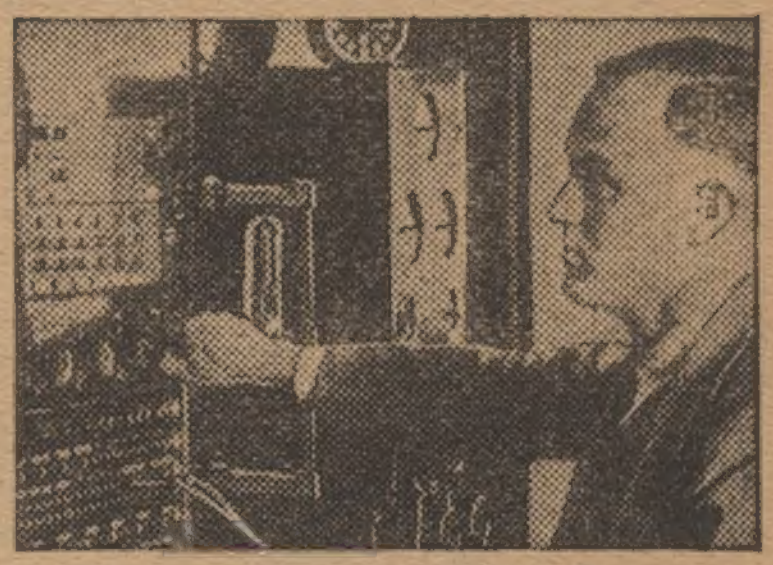

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DO YOU need money to pay the rent—to meet nagging bills—or to clothe and feed the family? Are you hard up for ready cash and obliged to deny yourself many comforts or even necessities? Are you working for such small wages that you can't make ends meet? Then you'll be interested in the experiences of these two men.

THIS MAN ACTED:

He said: "Yes, I need money. I am tired of penny pinching. Your generous offer sounds good to me. It costs nothing to investigate — I have everything to gain. I am going to send my name and find out just what you have to offer me."

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I'll help you start at once and back you up to the limit. Here's a bona fide cash-getting idea you may never have heard of before—a unique and utterly different way of getting the cash you need. With my plans I have "saved the day" for hundreds who were at their wits end. Not just another clock punching job . . . no back-breaking labor. Even spare time nets up to $5.00 a day . . . full time up to $60.00 a week. Good opportunities open. You don't require any previous experience and you don't risk any of your own money. Think of being prosperous again. Just send me your name for free facts.

Have Big Weekly Cash Earnings

If you are tired of slaving for small pay, here's your chance to break away and make big money. You can even start in your spare time—see the business grow—have cash in your pocket—be independent. Think of the joy of being a successful business person in your own locality with big, year 'round earnings of your own. You don't have the usual money risks of a business man. There is no limit to your possibilities. Earnings begin at once, the very first day.

STARTED PENNILESS 6½ Months Later Was Worth $1,200

"Only six and a half months ago I started with your company without a penny to my name, and today (I just finished my balance) I am worth a little more than $1,200.00. I can hardly believe it myself — such a success in so short a time! But it's the truth. Many a day I made from $15.00 to $20.00 clear profit. Your Happy Hustler, Hans Coordes, Nebr.

LOOK AT THESE UNUSUAL EARNINGS

I have a flood of glowing letters from prosperous, successful men and women telling of unusual earnings they have made with my plans. L. P. Boyne, La., made $67.20 in a week. Mrs. H. H. Hosick, Nebr., made $41.75 the first week. Steve Witt, Mo., made $21.59 in a day. Albert Becker, Mich., $100.00 in a week. George W. Creed, Ohio, $95.00 in a week. Exceptional earnings like these are positive proof of the amazing earning possibilities of my offer.

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I send everything you need. You positively don't risk a penny of your money. There is nothing complicated or puzzling about my money-making methods. You will be the judge and decide for yourself if the earning possibilities are satisfactory. Just give me a chance to explain the facts. It costs you nothing to find out. Send name on coupon or penny postcard. DO IT NOW!

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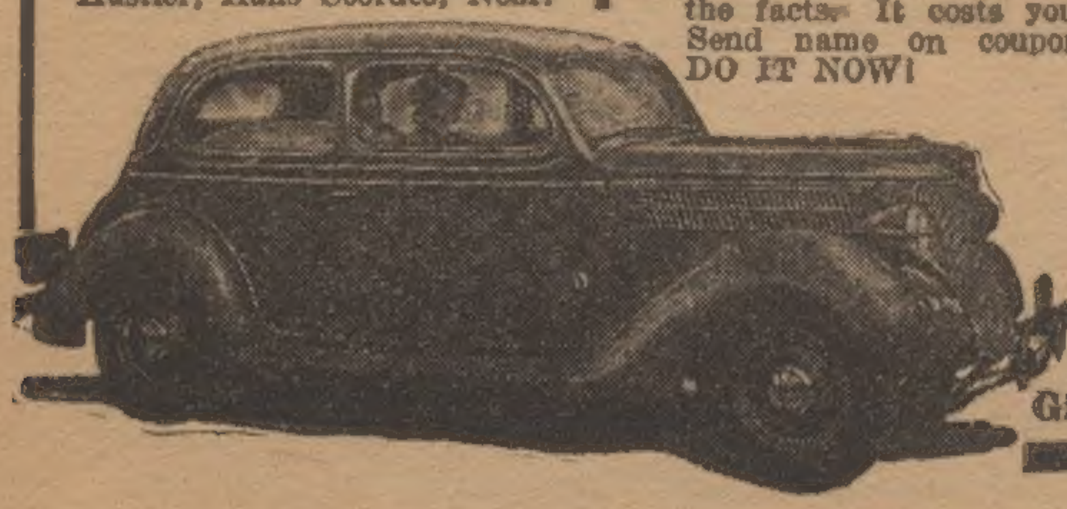

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A FEW WEEKS LATER

Now look at these two men as they meet in the street. One is a success and the other is a failure. One had the courage to try, the other had no faith—he was a doubter—he is still in hard luck. The man in the car is a success because he was willing to listen to reason. He was not afraid to send his name and get the facts. When he saw my public announcement stating I would give a brand new Ford Tudor Sedan to producers as a bonus in addition to cash earnings, he believed in my sincerity. Why don't you, too, investigate?

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Aviation Is Growing Fast

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- Instrument Specialist
- Electrician
- Shop Foreman
- Hangar Crew Chief
- Traffic Manager
- Purchasing Agent
- Aerial Mail Clerk
- Motor Expert
- Radio Operator
- Airplane Mechanic
- Field Work

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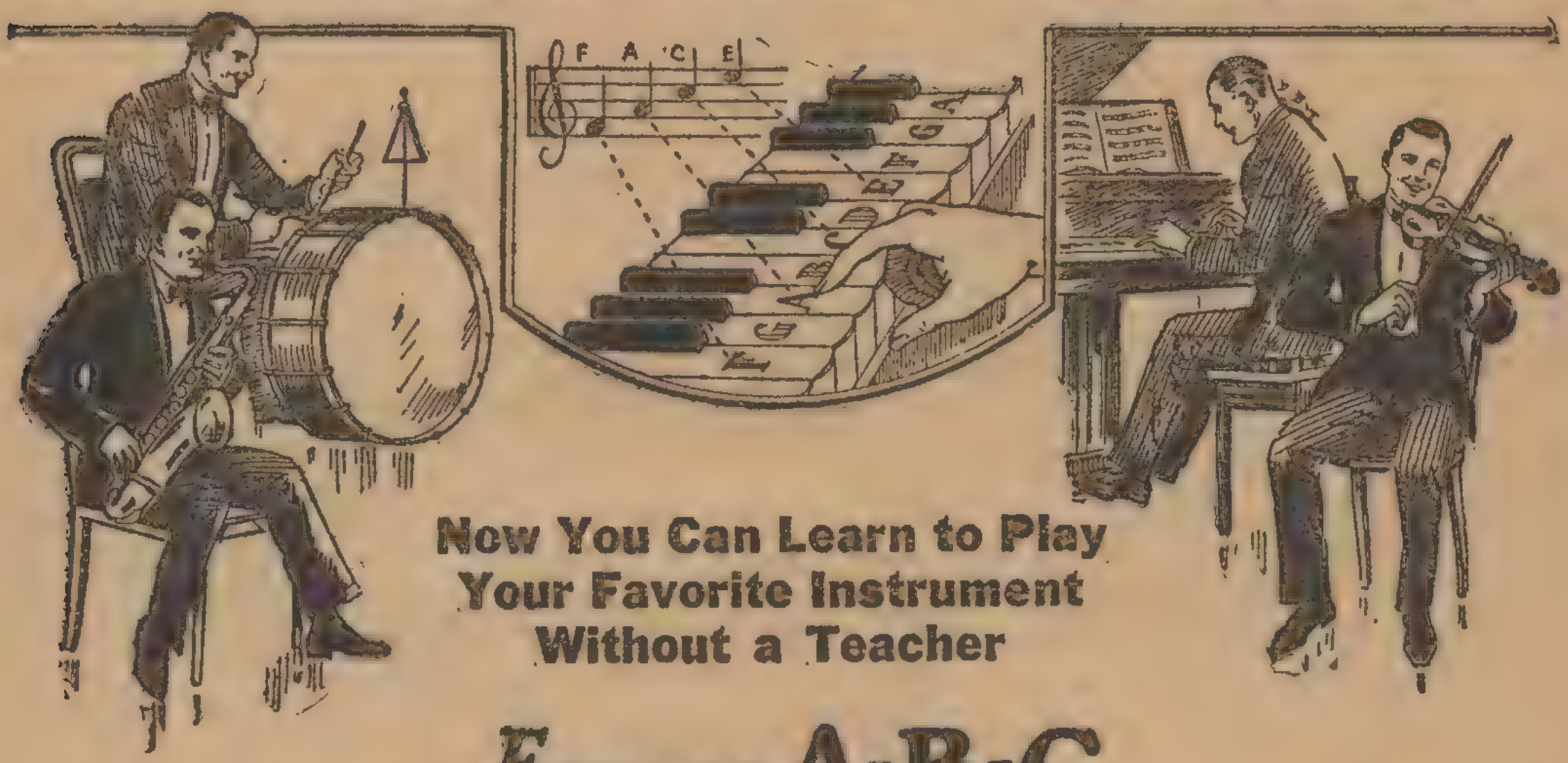

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Flute	
Harp	Drums and Traps
Cornet	
'Cello	Mandolin
Guitar	Trombone
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A Complete Romantic NOVEL

RUSTLERS'

The man struggled, cursing

CHAPTER I

Close Call

CLEM TRAVIS rode with the sun at his back, and his shadow ahead of him, as the mule-marked claybank moved at a mile-eating fox-trot along the rim-rock.

His lean, brown, clean-shaven face was serious and his grey eyes grave as he figured out his immediate prospects. They promised to be exciting.

Suddenly all shadow vanished. The landscape flattened as clouds shut out the sun.

Ranch Girl and Wandering Ranny Cross

HEYDAY

By
J. ALLAN DUNN

Author of "Hogleg Canyon," "Cold Brands," etc.

Travis turned in his saddle and looked back. A mass of black vapor like a derelict balloon, swollen with wind and rain, was dragging over the sharp peaks above the head of the canyon. When that cloud burst, the creek below would be turned to a raging torrent, rising a foot a minute. Travis glanced at the storm cloud apprenhensively.

At a time like this, Travis had preferred the wider and more open spaces to canyons. This was new territory to him. And neither canyon floor nor narrow trail was a good place in which to be cornered. For Travis did not know whether

Trails Amid Gun Thunder and Romance!

the reward bills were ahead of him or not.

He felt the cold wind on the back of his neck as it lifted and fluttered his bandanna neckerchief, ruffling the tail and mane of the claybank.

The sharp peak ripped open the belly of the black cloud, and let loose a hellish fury. The cloud belched a Niagara of wild water, driven by gusts that turned the downpour into slanting lances of hissing rain, herding them into the head of the canyon with deafening clamor.

The gale flogged the brush. It slapped the rocks, pitted the soil. It tore trees from their shallow or lifeless roots, and sent them tossing on the swiftly mounting flood that roared against the confining cliffs.

Travis yanked his poncho tarp from his soogan roll but he was soaked before he got it on. The weight of the rain bore down the brim of his Stetson. He shoved the strap under his jaw to keep the sombrero from being blown away, neck-reined the horse closer to the edge of the cliff to look at the swollen creek.

THE cliff fell sharp to the trail. He did not know how high it normally ran above the creek, but now the stream was within a few feet of it, no longer a stream, but a mad rush of scouring rapids.

He saw a horse struggling feebly as it was swept down. It seemed to have broken one or more of its legs. Undercurrents plucked at it, eddies and whirlpools spun it around. While Travis watched it gave up the fight, head beneath water, belly like a capsized boat. He saw it borne on the yellow crest of a wave, formed where the canyon walls pinched in, and a cataract thundered into a pool that had become a maelstrom.

The battered carcass hung on the verge for a moment, then was gone, but not before Travis had seen that it was bridled, cinched and saddled, though the latigo straps were loose and the saddle dragging.

Travis did not like to think of what had happened to its rider.

A dead tree was coming down the flood that looked like the skeleton of some primeval monster, washed out from its ancient grave. It seemed to claw and writhe as it surged along, rolling and rocking. The butt and roots held it down, still scraping, bumping, clinging to the uneven bed of the creek, partly anchoring it, acting as a drag, checking its speed.

Clinging to it desperately, shaken like a buster on a bucking bronco, a figure battled gallantly against inevitable death. The end would come when the tree pitched over the cataract.

It was a slight figure. A boy, not a man. Travis marveled at the courage, the agility and strength that combined, to let him ride that plunging mass.

He had to be saved. It held desperate risk for Travis, but there was barely time to think, none to lose.

He spoke to the claybank by name, Agudo, as he loosened his rawhide riata, braided foursquare, strong as a steel cable, pliable, tensile.

"Listen, you slick lizard," said Travis to Agudo, whose title meant 'quick-witted,' and who lived up to it; "you side me right, old-timer, or we all go."

First, they had to arrive on that narrow, eroded ledge of the trail, toward which the water was lapping with black foaming lips.

That was Agudo's job. He made most of the way on his tail, sliding, braking with his hoofs. The moment they hit the trail Clem was off, helping the claybank to halt, getting his loop ready for a ground toss. There was no space to swing his riata.

The tree and its passenger were

almost alongside. The trailing roots gripped something, were released. It lurched forward.

It was a girl! She had lost her hat. Her hair was short, but still too long for a boy, yellow as ripe maize in the husk. She wore boots and breeches and a silk blouse. The water molded the clothing about her slender, curving figure.

Her face was white as paper, her big eyes like holes burned in it, wide open. One sleeve had been torn away, her arm scratched deeply. It showed a crimson flow that the water washed away, and that then reappeared.

She did not cry out. She was gasping for breath to carry on, almost at the end of her strength. With the lunge of the tree, as the roots lost their hold, she slipped where she had braced herself against a bough-pit.

Clem's even loop flicked out. It settled over a stout branch as he called to Agudo, braced his own shoulder against the claybank's wither to help take up the strain.

They had to swing the tree close enough to land, so the girl could scramble along it to the trail.

The dallies were about the saddle horn. The claybank stood braced against the shock. The footing was poor. Travis felt Agudo heave against him, stagger. He saw his eyes bulging, nostrils wide, flaring crimson. He felt the snorting breath of the claybank and he found the top of a sunken boulder, and jammed his feet against it.

The riata was taut as a Pima bowstring. It twanged—but it held. The dead branch did not snap. But the weight, the force, was too much for them. Horse and man started slipping. Clem's knees had to bend, or his bones to break.

He cast a look at the girl. She was the bravest thing he had ever seen. She knew they had lost. She actually smiled at him as she motioned to him to cast off—that it was no use—that she thanked him with all her soul for the attempt. And then, she made a gallant, almost a gay, gesture of good-by.

Blood trickled down Clem's chin where he bit through his lip. Agudo groaned. It was the end.

Then the sunken butt grounded again, wedged between rocks. It held. Travis shouted to the claybank to back up, and it did so, slowly, with him helping. The top of the tree slowly swung toward the bank. Now the water was barely five feet from the trail. The boughs scraped against the land.

Still the butt stayed, the roots clung, the singing riata stood the strain.

The girl started to scramble along the trunk.

"Hold it," Travis told Agudo.

He knelt, and gave the girl his hand. Hers as cold as ice. He put his arm about her to steady her, feeling her tremble, overwrought.

THE riata parted with a loud whine, near the *hondo*. The slack came snaking back as the tree swung and the movement started the butt. Agudo sat on his haunches as the strain was abruptly released. Travis caught at the riata to steady the claybank, letting go of the girl.

She was crying and laughing at the same time, but she got the best of it.

"I thought I was gone," she said. "I was washed right out of the saddle. I'd said my prayers when I saw you sliding down the cliff, like an answer to it."

"The claybank'll carry two," Clem Travis told the girl. "Best git up behind."

She set her small foot on his as she faced him, swinging up to the cantle.

They went up trail. Down canyon it had been washed away. There were bad places but they passed

them, and got to the cliff rimrock once again.

"I'm Joan Reynolds," she told him. "My father owns the Bar R spread. It's not very far, if you'll take me home. Poor Blanca must have been drowned."

Travis remembered the white mare. "Reckon she didn't suffer much," he said. "I'll take you as fur as I kin."

He felt her stiffen. He knew she resented his attitude, did not understand it. Travis had heard of Reynolds, owner of the Bar R. He was probably the richest cattle raiser in the state, as Hal Brody was the richest handler of stock; the difference between the two men being that Brody bought more steers than he bred, using his HB-Connected spread as a sort of clearing-house for the market men.

Travis knew of these two, and of other men and conditions in the county. Reynolds would naturally be grateful to him for having rescued his daughter. She was an heiress and he was only a waddie. She might want to reward him, and wipe out the obligation.

And now, after having saved her life, Travis had calmly announced that he did not want to take her all the way home. He was willing to let her walk the last of the trip.

"I can walk from here," she told him coldly.

"No sense to that," he told her. "Which way do we go?"

They did not speak as they rode. They came to a hogback fringed with trees. They skirted it to rolling land with grama, mesquite and patches of bosque. Then Travis caught the lighter green of willows.

"That's Verde Creek," said the girl. "We're close to our wire. You can set me down there."

Travis did exactly as she asked. He did not know what she might be thinking about his hesitancy to go farther, but he knew there might be greater risk for him at Bar R headquarters than if he had taken the canyon trail.

At the wire the girl slid off Agudo. Her eyes were brilliant—brown eyes, the brown of pansy blossoms. Her mouth was sweet though it was set a little awry as she thanked him.

Travis lifted his Stetson. He smiled, with a flash of white teeth in his tanned face that stayed keenly in the girl's memory.

"Reckon yuh'd have done as much fer me," he said.

She watched him speculatively as he swung the claybank and tickled it with his spurs, galloping off.

CHAPTER II

The Reward

IT was not a line-rider, but Tom Dawson, son of the owner of the Triangle D. Joan was not too pleased to see him. She liked him well enough as a friend, but he was her ardent and persistent suitor.

Her father approved the match more than she did. So did Tom's parents. Joan's mother was dead. Tom was good-looking, he would inherit an outfit he knew how to handle, it would be considered a good match.

But young Dawson was impetuous, jealous and inclined to be too domineering and possessive. So far as romance went, he had not swayed her, and she was waiting for that before she considered marrying anybody.

While she had waited for the rider, treating her wound—that had started to bleed again—with antiseptic alkali dust that stung but served to clot and close the wound; she had acknowledged that the man who had saved her had aroused a nameless thrill that left her still a

little tremulous, for the first time a little fearful of her power of self-control.

She held no resentment for Travis having left her at the wire, telling herself that he must have urgent business that her rescue had interrupted. The physical contact with him had brought about a condition that still existed, as the contact between two poles might leave the mutual field magnetized.

It was not hero-worship, though she admired the way he had handled the rescue, his strength and daring. Tom Dawson would have attempted the same thing, not perhaps in exactly the same way, nor perhaps, quite as successfully.

She found herself comparing the two as Dawson flung a leg over his saddle-horn and slid to the ground, his face anxious. She was annoyed at the masterful way in which he took in her half-dried clothing, the handkerchief she had bound on her arm.

"Where's your hoss, honey?" he asked. "I was over to see your dad about a salt shipment. I saw Slim and he said you had ridden up to'ards the head of Borrasca Canyon. I headed thataway, an' saw the cloudburst. It shore worried me, but I figgered you'd seen the storm comin' an' started fer home. What happened?"

She knew the talk about salt was only an excuse to see her. He had tagged right after, asked Slim on purpose. It annoyed her.

She cut her story short, irked by the way Tom Dawson looked at her.

"You need somebody to look after yuh," he said.

"Not *you*, Tom Dawson," she flashed back. "Even you could not have dodged that cloudburst if you'd been where I was when it broke."

"I didn't mean that. There's bigger risks in pickin' up with strange rannies that happen along."

"Picking up? He picked me up. If he hadn't happened along I wouldn't be here. I suppose I should have drowned rather than let a man I didn't know save me?"

"It depends. Did he happen to look anything like this?"

He took some folded papers from his pocket, opened and gave her one of them, watching her intently.

"Sheriff Link jest got a batch of these in the mail," he said. "He aims to git 'em stuck up everywhere. I gave yore dad one fer yore bunkhouse. I'm goin' to put one up at the Triangle D."

JOAN felt her heart pound a few beats. She stared at a reward bill. The face of the man who had rescued her stared at her. He was named as "Maverick Joe," alias The Cactus Kid, also known as Clem Travis. He was wanted for stock-thieving and highway robbery. Suspected of murder

She felt Dawson's searching regard.

"I wouldn't say it was the same man," she answered indifferently.

"You wouldn't, but mebbe you *could*, if he didn't happen to be all-fired good-lookin'. Which way did he go?"

"I was too tired to notice."

"I'll find out. I kin read sign. An' I kin use a thousand *pesos* as well as the next man."

"Are you letting me walk to the ranchhouse?" she asked him.

"*He* did. Because he was afraid to be seen. I suppose you gave him a kiss fer savin' yuh," Dawson blazed angrily.

She looked at him steadily and started to walk away. He came after her, caught her arm.

"I didn't mean that. You ride my hoss an' I'll walk with yuh."

"You act like a *cochero*," she said. But she mounted his bay. It meant more time for the Cactus Kid, or whatever his right name might be,

to get to wherever he was headed for in such a hurry.

Saving her had delayed him. Now she was helping to pay that debt. She could deny the resemblance, delay Tom Dawson all she could.

"Don't let anything like this come between us," he pleaded.

"There was plenty of room."

She took time to tell her father the tale of her rescue, giving far more details, while Dawson listened, eager to tell of his own discovery.

When he did, Reynolds frowned. He had lost heavily from rustlers of late. He had publicly sworn to help hang the next one caught. If this rustler had saved his girl's life, he was in a cleft stick.

"How about it?" he demanded of her.

"I told Tom I didn't recognize the picture," she said wearily. "I'm tired. I'm going to get out of these togs and lie down."

"I'M bettin' he's the same man, jest the same," Dawson told Reynolds when Joan had left them. "She ain't foolin' me any. She was too blamed cool about it all. She aims to shield him because he happened along an' helped her out the creek. He'd be headin' fer Brasada, makin' fer Padilla's like as not. If he ain't one of the gang thet's been stealin' our steers he'll jine up with 'em, git Brody to hide him out."

"Hold on, Tom," said Reynolds. "You been runnin' off at the mouth too much lately about Hal Brody. Don't go off half-cocked, son."

"He plays politics," said Dawson sulkily. "He's in with a bunch of crooks thataway. He sells his beef too cheap to come by it honest. I ain't the only one suspects him."

"Show me proof that Brody is a thief an' I'll provide the rope to hang him, an' put the noose in it. Better git after this Cactus Kid, Tom."

"I shore will."

Dawson took another look at the halftone reproduction of what was plainly an excellent photograph, and damned the original for his good looks. Just the reckless sort of waddie to catch a girl's imagination, he told himself. Well, he'd know him, the first time he laid eyes on him.

Sheriff Link was an old-timer, shrewd and cagey. He stroked his long mustachios, tawny and streaked with grey, as he listened to Tom Dawson's tale.

"You spoke to anyone else about this outside Reynolds, his gal, an' me?"

"Not yet. Why?"

The sheriff's code of Western chivalry was finer than Tom Dawson's. "Reckon it won't do to bring Joan Reynolds into this," he said quietly.

Dawson reddened, rebuked. "I didn't aim to," he replied. "We'll git this bird over to Brasada. I'm bettin' he'll be cached at Padilla's *posada*, waitin' to meet up with the *ladrones* who make it their hangout. By mornin' he'll likely be hid out in the hills, roostin' with the rustlers."

Dawson did not say anything to the sheriff about his suspicions of Brody. Link was not the kind who accepted suggestions readily from his juniors. In this matter of the Cactus Kid it was different. Tom was giving information that was asked for.

"I want yuh to make me a deputy an' take me along," he added.

The sheriff's eyes twinkled a little. "I might do that," he answered. "But it ain't so easy to walk inter Padilla's *posada* without him knowin' it. Or to search it without a warrant. Still, it ain't a bad idee to go to Brasada an' see what we kin pick up. It's a funny thing. Padilla was over here this mornin' to see about his license. I give him one of them reward bills. Padilla 'ud go quite a ways fer a thousan' *pesos*,

if he could do it quietly. In his business a man don't like to be advertised none as an informer."

"That hombre is there by now, if he went there at all," Dawson insisted.

The sheriff nodded. "Wouldn't wonder, son. Not much use our gittin' there till along second or third drink time. I'll swear yuh in, an' see if I kin find you a star."

CHAPTER III

That's Shootin'

THE Posada del Norte, the inn owned and run by Juan Padilla, was a place where gringos, as a rule, were not welcome. Travis noticed that in short order. He drifted into Brasada after dark, despite Dawson's idea that he would hurry to get under cover. He did not yet know about the display of the reward bills, but he was playing safe.

He had been told about the Posada del Norte, and he had learned among other things a certain password, or pass sentence, that might give him a measure of welcome.

The *posada* was two-storied, built with thick adobe walls about a central patio where a spring flowed into a fountain. There was also stable room. With its cellars well stocked, the inn could stand a siege.

Travis saw that no lights showed on the ground floor save a dim lantern just inside the archway that was the only entry. The windows were both barred and shuttered; sure sign that the *posada* had been, or would be, taken over for the night by patrons who did not wish outside interference or interruption.

The arch extended beneath the second story to the patio. It was closed by two sets of gates, or doors, heavy and well barred. A rider could be admitted through the first and held. There was an observation grille, with a slide to close it.

Still in his saddle on the claybank, Travis yanked at a chain that caused a bell to clang inside somewhere, dismal as a knell.

At last the slide opened and he made out a face observing him by the light of the lantern.

"Quien es?" asked a harsh voice.

"The Cactus Kid."

"The inn is full. Only those who are expected may come in."

This was the time for the password. Travis—the Cactus Kid, sprang it.

"Cada oveja con su pareja."

It could be roughly translated as, "Like seeks like." It worked. The second gates were open and he rode through to the patio.

Here streaks of light shone from some of the lower windows. There were outside stairways leading to galleries and the second floor, vine-clad arbors over tiled walks where benches were placed. He could hear the tinkle of the fountain, see the gleam of water. Agudo moved to nose the cold, refreshing flow. The front gates had been carefully closed. A peon appeared out of nowhere.

"I will take the senor's horse," he said.

He passed into the big main room. Men were lined up at the bar, patronizing the gambling layouts, some of them playing cards or talking at smaller tables.

In the rear, musicians played softly on fiddles, guitars and Indian drums. No girls had as yet arrived. The night was young. But the low room already was filmed with smoke wisps, with the odors of brandy, whiskey and *tequila*.

Most of those present were Mexies. About a dozen Americans, thin-lipped, cold-eyed, hard-faced range riders.

Travis went to the bar and called for whiskey. He tossed down a gold

eagle, expecting no change. It was the custom with a new customer and the first drink. The others who were served on his money lifted their glasses toward him but there was no more friendship in their eyes than in those of sharks. They drank his liquor but they had not accepted him.

But they knew who he was. No doubt about that. One of the reward bills was posted up on the wall at the end of the bar. Travis looked it over as he rolled a quirly.

A greasy, swarthy Mexican came up to him, half obsequious, half familiar. A squat man with a big belly and two chins.

"I am Juan Padilla, senor," he said in Spanish. "I own this place. It is but a poor hovel, but it is yours."

Travis greeted the *posadero* in his own tongue. He knew that he would own just as much of the *posada* as he could pay for. And he knew that the fat Padilla was weighing him against the thousand dollars reward, which was counterbalanced, so far, by the fact that the newcomer had the password.

Somebody, a bigger fish in this pond than Padilla, would have the final word.

Travis accepted the offer of a drink from Padilla, which was really paid for by himself, but it showed a certain tolerance, or suspended judgment. Travis was there to meet the man who was the real boss.

He looked on at the faro game, passed to a table where a man with a face the color of a fishbelly, a mouth like a half-healed wound, and eyes like a lizard, banked a Mexican dice game.

"Try your luck, cowboy?" he asked Travis.

Travis watched the play for a while before he made a pass.

The man who was banking also played when the cubes came to him.

Twice they halted to

There were some curious things about the dice. On the face of it, all should be fair, since all used the same cubes. But Travis knew that experts could make dice roll as they wished, eight times out of ten, by "setting" them, even when the dice were absolutely above reproach. The banker might have one or more partners in the game.

These dice did not spin on any of their corners, even when one of the players tossed them out violently. When they came to Travis, he gave them a gentle roll and threw a natural. He tried, and won again, then lost—just as he was beginning to get the hang of the bones.

The man to his left took them over. Most of the players had drunk enough to dull their best judgment. They were just ripe for a clever crook to take. This banker, Travis thought, was not so smart as he was bold.

Travis did not bet on the next play. He saw Padilla hurrying into the patio. Somebody important might be arriving. The hubbub of the place drowned any outer sounds.

Then Padilla came back with a man of such striking appearance that even those present, who must have often seen him before, halted for a moment in whatever they were doing. They seemed to come to attention though he did not notice any of them especially, greet any as he stood looking over the room.

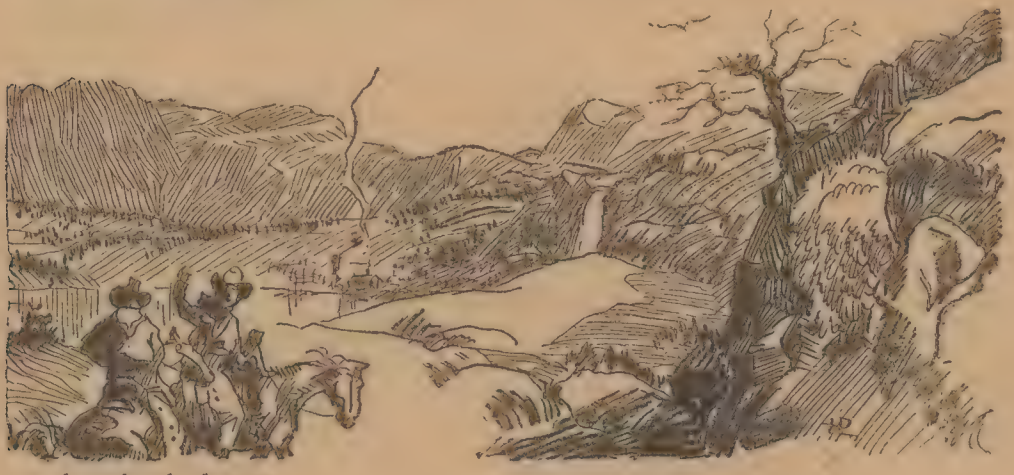
He was tall and dark, and he limped slightly on the left leg. His right cheek was puckered fantastically about a healed but angry scar, where the horn of a steer had gone through. The muscles of one eye had stiffened and the lower lid hung down like a mastiff's haw.

It was Brody, of the HB-Connected. His black hair was clipped close to his skull, well-shaped, holding brains far above the average.

His twisted gaze was cold and hard. The spirit of the man seemed to pervade the place, to blight the amusement of all, as if an icy wind had suddenly blown through the room. Then he passed on with Padilla into the latter's private office, at one end of the bar.

Travis knew something about the story that had changed a man who had once been a gay blade, a flash rider, a dancer, into a moody hater of mankind.

His horse had slipped as he tried to swing a stampede. He had come out of it barely alive, with the terribly mutilated face, and the loss of one foot.



breathe the horses

He avoided all his old friends, men and women. Women, he never spoke to now. The one with whom he had been in love, and who had been flattered by his attention, though he was several years the elder, had met him face to face after the accident, the first time he had steeled himself to go out in public.

She had been away, and had just returned, not knowing or realizing how terribly he had suffered. She did not even recognize him at the first glimpse. Her reaction had been that of horror, then of pity. But Brody, with his ego seared and tender, had thought it loathing.

He had looked at her as if he had never seen her before, then turned

away, with the scarred sneer deepened. Nor would he give any chance for explanation. His hurt pride and love had changed to bitterness and hate.

The girl was none other than Joan Reynolds.

Brody quitted his old haunts. He handled stock in a big way, buying far more than he bred. He was smart at getting beef contracts, using political pull to secure them on state projects. He made the *posada* the amusement center for himself, his riders and his friends.

Old friends, rebuffed, drifted apart. Ugly rumors began to spread that Brody was handling "slow elk," that his spread was a cover for shadier enterprise; that he was the secret boss of a band of rustlers. But there was no proof.

THE dice came round to Travis again. He was sure they were crooked by now. They were fashioned of bone, or an opaque substance that looked like it.

This time he made four passes in a row, rolling naturals, letting his stakes ride. He saw the banker exchange looks with the men Travis had figured for confederates. He knew the dice would be exchanged as soon as he gave them up.

On the fifth throw, his point came eight, and he lost. The banker gave a little puff of relief, reached for the money, and stopped, as if turned to stone.

Travis had his left hand palm down over the dice. His right held his hogleg, accurately covering the banker's middle, between the short ribs.

"These dice are phony," he announced. "Combinations. Plugged an' shaped—both. Get me a long glass of water."

They watched as he dropped the dice into the water, and the same numbers repeated themselves. Their sides had been shaved, the ace and deuce spots bored, plugged with lead or gold, the spots repainted.

The fishbelly skin of the crooked gambler was filmed with sweat. He trembled like a leaf.

"There's jest one thing to do with phonies," Travis said. "Git rid of 'em. Like this."

He tossed the fake dice in the air. His right hand moved again, fast as the strike of a trout after a fly. His six-gun roared. The slugs buried themselves in a ceiling beam. The dice disappeared in mid-air, shattered to dust.

"That's shootin'!"

The voice was harsh, arresting. It came from Brody, who now came forward, limping slightly, as Satan might limp, his piercing gaze on the exposed gambler.

"Git out," he said. "Git goin', an' keep goin', Slade! Keep on goin' till the climate gits healthier. Further you go, the better it'll be. Leave the *dinero* on the table."

Slade left, eager to get away from the murmurs that were growing ominous. Padilla began explaining his own ignorance and innocence to Brody, who only looked at him with glittering eyes and the grimace that might be a sardonic grin.

"Better see he gits off the place," he said to the *posadero*, still in the same rasping, unnatural tones. Padilla obeyed. "You boys know how much you each lost?"

Travis was the big winner. "Let's divvy it up equal all round," he said generously.

"Right," said Brody approvingly. "Padilla will set up the drinks all round."

They applauded that with laughter, surged to the bar. Brody turned to Travis as they stood at the end of the long counter. He tapped the reward poster.

"I could use a man like you," he said. "Make it worth yore while. Fix it so you'd stay under cover, an' git a stake ready to move on when

you felt like it. How about it, Maverick—or will it be Cactus?"

"Make it Cactus," said Travis easily. He felt easier. Yet he knew that once Brody got his hooks into a man, he would not lightly release him. He was the sort who would play safe with men he used under cover. "I'll think it over. Want an answer right away?"

He said that for effect, his reply already determined. Brody gave him that grinning twitch of his mangled cheek, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Suit yorese'f," he said. "I'll see yuh later."

Padilla had hurried out again, in response to a summons from a man Travis thought was the gatekeeper. He left the door open to the patio. Travis glimpsed hooded figures slipping past, heard laughing. The dance-girls, culled from the neighborhood, were arriving, shawls and *mantillas* about their heads. The *fandango* was about to begin.

The musicians changed their tunes to dancing measure. The men drifted to the back of the big room. Brody stayed at the bar, a solitary figure.

The girls entered coquettishly from the back. There were about a dozen of them. Brody paid them to entertain his friends. Some of them were masked, either to conceal their identity or as an added lure. They were the sisters, daughters, sweethearts, and sometimes the wives of the Brasada Mexican colony. These dances gave them a chance at tawdry romance and adventure, beside cash for *dulces* and *lindos*. The masks avoided complications. It was an unwritten rule that they were not to be lifted except by consent.

Travis was looking on when a girl in a yellow gown came swayingly up to him. She moved gracefully, her eyes dark and bright through her mask. Her hair was covered with the lace *mantilla* draped over the high-backed comb.

"Senor," she said, in broken English, "I theenk you are a strangaire een thees place. *Quiza*, you dance weeth me? *Si?*"

There was a charm about her, a freshness different from the dance-girls Travis had known. She was even shy. Quite irresistible. He figured her as the daughter of some farmer *labrador*, a cut above a peon; tempted to get a little excitement.

She was easy to dance with. So was Travis. They glided and dipped to the rhythm. He found that she was deftly guiding him. When they were a little apart from the rest she began to speak to him in a low voice.

"SENOR, you weel please smile. Laugh. Leesten *muy preso*. You mus' not ask me my name, 'ow I find thees out, but you *mus'* believe me. I know who you are, senor. 'Ere, you may theenk you are *seguro* but you are not. *El jerif*, 'e ees comeeng 'ere weeth 'ees men to take you. *Tambien*, eef eet ees known *I* am 'ere—*porvida!*— I know not w'at would 'appen to *me!* So, you mus' believe me, an' go."

It was not hard to believe her. Travis thought she might well be telling the truth. He was of no mind to be taken by the sheriff.

He wondered if the girl he had saved earlier that day had betrayed him, unwittingly. She might have seen one of the handbills and given him away. She might have done it knowingly, disgusted at learning who and what he was.

"Why should you warn me?" he asked. "Why should you care what happens to me?"

"*Quiza*, I like the way you look an' dance. *Quiza*, some day I ask you to remember I warn you. *Quien sabe, caballero?*"

Her voice was warm, velvety, more than merely coquettish, he fancied. It changed to intense seriousness again. "*Senor*, you *mus'* go!"

The music stopped. A tall rider

came up, swaggering, his breath strong of *tequila*. He laid a hand on the girl's bare arm. She shrank from him.

"Don't be skittish, sister. You pick 'em good, hombre," he said to Travis, "but you don't *own* 'em. You're a new one, sis', let's take a look at your face."

"No! No! Eet ees not allow'—" There was genuine alarm and consternation in her voice. The half drunken waddie laughed at her.

"To hell with the rules!" He made a pass for her mask.

Travis grabbed his wrist, twisting his arm between his shoulder blades.

"She don't wish it, *amigo*," he said. "*Sabe?* Want I should break your arm?"

THE man fought, cursing, and the girl slipped away. The fight attracted attention. Other riders came toward them. Travis released the other, who stood snarling, feeling his forearm gingerly.

Travis backed warily to the wall, watching hands, his own ready to draw. Then there came the rasp of Brody's voice.

"In trouble already, Cactus?"

Travis told him briefly about the mask. The other did not contradict him.

"You'll git yourself killed over some fool woman some day, Slim," said Brody curtly. "You know the rule. Cut it out. You two shake hands. I want no fillies splittin' up my herd."

There was derision in his voice, a measure of contempt. He plainly considered Travis—or Cactus—one of his men, and his dislike of women was profoundly emphasized.

Slim looked sheepish, held out his hand.

"Shucks," he said. "I was wrong. Let's have a drink."

They moved toward the bar, thronged with men and their partners. Travis did not see the girl in the yellow dress. She had vanished from the room.

Suddenly there came a knocking at the outer gate that sounded through the talk. It was repeated. Padilla hurried out. He came back wide-eyed.

"It's the sheriff. Got two men with him. Says he's bound to come in, or I'll lose my license."

The *posadero* spoke in Spanish. Travis understood him well enough. So did the rest. Brody held up his hand, and there was silence, broken by the insistent pounding on the gate.

"That means he's got a warrant. He's after you, Cactus," said Brody. "We've got to let him in. How about that job with me?"

"I'm takin' it."

"Good enough. We've got a back way out of here. Padilla'll show it to you. I'll send a man round with yore hoss. Wait fer him where the tunnel ends in the brush. Then head north fer the notch in the range. It's almost in line with the *posada* but you'd best swing wide. I'll handle the sheriff, an' send out two men to meet yuh. If they ain't in sight, time you come to the monuments, lay low an' wait."

The knocking on the gate persisted. Padilla, flurried, took Travis by the elbow.

Back of an inside stair that led to the upper story from the main room, a door opened, with stairs leading to the cellars. They were deep and ample, well provisioned. Padilla had picked up a lantern that hung, lighted, inside the door, and scuttled ahead. Once Travis thought he heard light footsteps behind, but he did not look back.

They came to the third cellar, lined with casks, some of them huge as tuns. Padilla paused in front of one of them, touched a latch on the bulge of the vat, and the whole front of it swung backward.

Travis smelled, through the musty,

alcoholic air of the place, a whiff of the open.

"Right ahead, senor," panted Padilla. "Wait teel your *caballo* arrive."

A figure came out of the darkness of the cellar as if materializing. Padilla swung his lamp, uttered a fervent curse.

It was the girl in the yellow dress.

"You weel take me weeth you, senor? I weel run away w'en we reach the end."

Padilla grabbed her by her wrist. "You will come back with me," he said in Spanish. "I do not know you. Take off your mask. You have made trouble enough already."

"I know her," said Travis. "She comes with me."

CHAPTER IV

The Hideout

THE tunnel emerged at the bottom of a gulch which was heavily furred with brush. Travis put out the lantern. It was best to be careful. He imagined that Padilla used this secret entry originally for smuggling in his duty-dodged brandies and *tequilas*, and it was equally useful for a quick, unnoticed exit from the *posada*.

He carefully moved aside the boughs and leafage, helped the girl get through to the gulch. This side of it was in shadow.

"Muchas gracias, senor," she said. "It would 'ave been terrible eef I 'ad been force' to take off my mask. Eet would make too much talk. You see I come to the *posada* through a frien', a girl whose place I took. I wear also 'er dress, 'er *mantilla*."

"Why?"

"Ah, senor. A girl like sometimes to see such place, even eef she not like to be seen. *Quiza, 'er* people would not like 'er to go. *Quiza,* 'er *querido,* 'e would forbeed."

"Have you got a sweetheart, a *querido?"* Travis asked her. The girl intrigued him.

"Quien sabe? But I 'ave 'ear that the shereef comes to the *posada* to take a *robador*. I see you, an' you do not look like a *robador* to me. *Tambien,* you dance *muy fuente*. So I tell you. Then they try to make me show my face, wheech would get me een mucho trouble. Now I mus' go. Back to my frien'. I weel change my dress, an' return to my own *casa*. None weel know. Eet ees not far. So, *hasta la vista."*

"You mean that?"

She laughed. It was like a peal of silver chimes. *"Quiza. Quien sabe?"*

Then she was gone, running lightly down the trail. She started to clamber up the side of the gulch for a short cut. In her yellow gown and black *mantilla* she looked like a flying moth, Travis thought.

Her gown caught in a thorn. She stooped to free it, and a bramble clutched her *mantilla,* snatched it free of comb and hair.

Travis whistled beneath his breath. The Spanish she had used had been fluent enough, and there were such things as blond Mexican girls, who were *mestizos*.

Blond hair, natural, pale gold in the moonlight; and brown eyes! Travis thought of where he had seen that combination last. In the girl he had saved from the cloudburst, the daughter of Reynolds of the Bar R.

Whoever it was, she had freed herself, caught up her *mantilla,* and reached the top of the gully. There the moon caught her fairly for an instant as she looked back. She could not have seen Travis in the deep shadows, but she waved a slim hand at him, and was gone, leaving him to wonder.

It seemed a long time before he saw a rider leading another horse

Joan

coming down the narrow trail. The claybank looked like a ghost horse in the gloom, but Travis was glad to welcome it.

"My name's Charlie Simpson — 'Chuck' fer short," said Brody's man, whose features Travis vaguely recognized in the dusk of the gully bottom. "Had to stall a while. That sheriff is a nosey guy. He searched the hull *posada* but he didn't find that tunnel entry. He had Old Man Reynolds of the Bar R erlong. Thet's the *hombre* thet is jest itchin' to string up a rustler. They say he mavericked plenty when he was startin' in his own spread.

"The sheriff shore ruined the evenin'. The gals all got skeery an' run out on us. The dance is a bust. Sheriff had four more men along 'sides him an' Reynolds. Young Dawson of the Triangle D was one of 'em. He musta figgered some on a battle. Looks like they wanted yuh bad, Cactus."

"They seem some eager, at that," said Travis. "Too bad about the dance. You comin' with me?"

"Nope. We allus drift out of town separate, case some slick coyote might try to trace us to the hideout. You'll be met, same as Brody told you. Brody's taken the men on the HB payroll, an' they've all gone out to the spread in the open. Sheriff an' his sleuths are still pokin' round Brasada. I'll go out of here to the left, you strike right. I'll sort of trail the sheriff myself. He's got nothin' on me though he don't act like he exactly loved me. I'll be seein' yuh later, at the hideout. So long."

Travis watched him ride off, silent in the trail dust, before he mounted Agudo. He had gone perhaps a hundred yards when the claybank suddenly cocked its ears and tossed its head.

Travis sped his hand to his hogleg butt. On his left, silhouetted against the moonlight, he glimpsed a rider, who seemed searching the gulch, and who disappeared. The trail twisted with the course of the gully. A horseman appeared ahead, a star shining on his breast, the muzzle of his poised gun gleaming. There came a challenge.

"You, Cactus, h'ist 'em! Claw the sky! There's two back of you. Let him know it, Tom."

A voice sounded from the rear. "Okay, Sheriff." It was funny the sheriff had not mentioned the man on the bluff. It might be another of Brody's men, scouting. He might be friend or foe. But a foe in the open was better than three in the gulch.

Travis knew Agudo could climb like a mountain goat. The sides of the gulch were scrubby, the one on his right a bit too steep. On the left there was a side gully, where surface waters had funneled down.

"Come on, slow," ordered the sheriff.

Travis obeyed. He did not need his hands for Agudo. Opposite the side-gully, he pressed-in with his right knee. Agudo swerved with the

speed of a champion cutting-horse as Travis gave him the steel in his flanks, and the sheriff's gun roared.

Flame stabbed the gloom. A slug cut through the collar of Travis' shirt as he bent forward. It almost creased his spine.

Again the gun spoke. Tom Dawson and the man with him were afraid to fire for fear of hitting Sheriff Link. And the target had disappeared. They came racing at a gallop and jammed into Link and each other at the foot of the gully, giving Travis the seconds he badly needed.

The claybank scoured up the slant like a badger digging in. Lead sang. A bullet nipped Agudo's flank, and sped the claybank into super effort. Travis felt the burn of hot metal just above his elbow.

Then he was up. Below, the pursuers still blundered against each other, all trying to get up at once, none of their mounts as good as Agudo, the three of them swearing, half choked with dust.

The man who had looked down was still there. He rode a dark bay, and did not sit the saddle well. On his head was the narrow-rimmed Stetson gamblers affected. The moon showed him up—Slade.

It was easy enough now to see how the sheriff had learned about the gully, even if he could not find the *posada* end of the tunnel. Slade had tipped him off, eager for revenge, keen for the reward.

He gaped at Travis as if he saw an apparition, awkwardly swung his horse, and tried to bolt. He had no spurs, the bay was no sprinter, Slade no buckaroo. But the fear of death was in his heart, and he did his best.

Travis had repaired his broken riata. It had been longer than most, and there was still a good thirty feet of it. He loosed it, thankful that the braided rawhide did not kink.

He chanced the three back of him.

Travis

They were not yet in sight. And he rode straight for Slade on the bay.

The gambler, with his fishbelly face clammy with terror, drew a gun and fired. The leap of his horse sent the bullet high and wide as Travis sent his loop through the air. It settled over the shoulders of Slade, and Travis took his dallies. He reined Agudo, and the claybank slid to a standstill, braced, as the bay sped on and Slade was dragged from the saddle, over the cantle, his arms bound to his sides.

The bay ran off with stirrups clacking. Travis swung Agudo, dragging the crooked gambler through the brush, yelling until dust plugged mouth and nose, soon turned to a wet plaster with blood. Sharp spurs and snags tore his clothes to ribbons, thorns ripped deep, cactus and catclaw scratched his face, his hands and hide. A clump of stiff chaparral made a brake of his bulk and dead weight; and Travis halted.

He slid to the ground and loosed the riata from the senseless figure. Slade was alive, but he was likely to wish himself dead before he

healed. It was terrible punishment.

There were shouts again, and shots. Travis laughed as he vaulted into his saddle. He fired back, in the air. Then he gave Agudo his head, and they were off, with the wind of their speed whipping Agudo's mane, pluming his tail, pinning back the front brim of Travis' Stetson.

He passed the head of the gulch, out of six-gun range. They had no rifles. He could see the lights twinkling in Brasada, he saw the deep notch in the sierra. Above it the Big Dipper swung, its pointers locating the North Star, just above the gap; and he headed for the sierra across the level sage flats, with the clean, pungent scent of the herb in his nostrils.

As the claybank stretched out, lengthening its free stride, its belly tickled by the bushes, Travis started to sing in a husky but musical enough voice.

He had to sing. He was exhilarated. It had been a full day, with the girl at the beginning and the end of it. He was sure now that it was Joan Reynolds who had risked her reputation to go to the *posada* and warn him.

Standing out from the base of the sierra were hundreds of monuments in white and red limestone, a phantom array that looked in the moonlight like the ruins of a long dead and devastated city.

AS Travis neared them, two men came riding to meet him. So far, Travis had followed almost a bee-line, the claybank's speed had soon left pursuit far behind. These men too had ridden hard. Their horses were wet and still heaving.

He had seen both of them in the *posada*. Brody's men, not on the HB payroll but part of his rustling outfit. They had left the inn early, riding separately perhaps, but riding hard, obedient to the will of their mutilated but militant leader.

They hailed him briefly, placed themselves one on each side of him. It might be as escort, it might be as guards. Travis was not likely to bolt. If he had been accepted, they were leading him just where he wanted to go. But they were not too friendly.

"You git away without trouble, Cactus?" asked one of them finally.

"Some." He told them about what had happened, not mentioning the girl. They grunted approval.

"Yuh oughta roped him by the neck," said the other. "If Brody ever lays hands on him, he'll wish you had."

Travis followed their side leads. They kept steadily on through the fantastic monuments by a route that was devious, without the slightest uncertainty. They halted finally at the main wall of the sierra. That was time and weather-scarred also, ledged and pocked and pitted with gulches and ravines.

They checked outside a shallow opening, into which the moon shone almost directly. It was, Travis judged, less than fifty feet in depth. He could see every detail of it plainly. There was no exit. The walls rose sheer, though they had been sculptured by the lathes of wind and water here and there, into flat niches a few feet deep.

"Here's where we go in, believe it or not," said the man on his right. "An' here's where we blindfold yuh, Cactus. If yuh want to go ahead. Brody said to put it up to you. You kin quit here an' now, if yuh want. If you stay yuh'll mebbe *sabe* this entry, *manaña*. It sure is tricky. How about it, fella?"

Travis grinned. "Take my bandanner," he said.

They used his, and one of theirs, making sure he could not see. They were inside the blind canyon, and

He strained forward, stretching out his hand

then they went straight ahead to the wall at the end, where there was one of the niches, or recesses, that had looked as if it started out to be a cavern and quit.

He heard one of them dismount. He heard a slight noise, like a rusty hinge. Then they went straight ahead, on into the solid face of the cliff, as if by enchantment.

He felt a draught of air. They started to climb and kept on doing it. Now they were no longer abreast but in single file, he in the middle. He sensed space. The way twisted, zigzagged, ever mounting.

Twice they halted to breathe the horses. They warned him several times of the narrowness of the trail, and he let Agudo pick his own way.

They could not bring cattle in to the hideout this way, he was sure. And he was completely baffled by the way they had gone through the cliff. Before they blindfolded him, he had visualized every aspect of the place. It was still photographed on his mind. There was *no* way past that barrier. Yet they had gone through.

When they stopped for the third time, his bandage was removed. They were in a corridor of stone where softer rock had been eroded between high walls of harder stone, the sort of formation usually named the Devil's Stairway, or Causeway, for the benefit of tourists.

"We're here," said one of them. "Move up, Cactus, an' take a look-see."

Travis nudged the claybank, and came to where an open trail dipped sharply from the ridge into a hidden bowl of the sierra, a secret park, serene beneath the moon.

There were trees and brush, grass, and water flowing into it from a fall a hundred feet or more in height which formed a lake. There were two crooked-pole corrals, two log cabins where no lights showed. On the left he glimpsed a wider trail winding upward and, near where it rose from the glen, there stood a small shack almost hidden in the trees.

Near the lake, a bunch of cattle was calmly bedded down. They must, he figured, have come into the place by the wider trail.

One of the men gave an owl hoot, repeated three times. A lantern appeared in front of one of the cabins, was waved twice, set down on or near the ground.

"My name is Clark, Cactus," said the man who had hooted. "This is Sanders. We usually call him 'Red.' We got plenty grub an' licker down there, an' a good cook. That was the cook swingin' the lantern. He might rustle us some chuck."

"I could eat a snack an' stand a drink," said Travis. "I don't want to horn in but would you mind tellin' me how that stock got in here? Not the way we come?"

RED laughed. "I wouldn't mind, but Brody might. I'll let him tell yuh."

Travis nodded. He knew a man found out more by keeping his mouth shut, than using it to ask questions. Eyes and ears were the best spies.

The cook was called Pedro, a fat Mexican who seemed good-natured. The beef had been hung, and he broiled steaks over an outside fire. Clark brought out a jug of good corn whiskey from one of the cabins. They had turned their horses loose. Travis knew Agudo would not stray, and this was home pasture for the others.

"There's a couple spare bunks fer you to pick from," said Red. "Me, I'm goin' to roll in near the fire."

That suited Travis, and he spread tarp and blankets and was soon asleep. It seemed that he had barely closed his eyes when they were open again. The sky was flushing in the

east, there were a few wisps of pink vapor overhead. Two more riders were coming into the basin. Red was awake, rubbing his eyes.

"Two more of the boys," he said. "They was in Brasada after we left. Checks the tally, 'cept for Chuck. He ought to be in." He waved an arm at the pair, and they came with a rush. Travis recognized them as having been at Padilla's, and he saw that there was something wrong. So did Red. Now Sanders and three more men came from a cabin. Pedro started making up his fire.

"What's wrong?" asked Red. "What kep' you rannies so late? An' where's Chuck?"

"In jail at Clavija, fer murder! He shot young Tom Dawson. Dawson's like to die. Seems Chuck was sort of trailin' the sheriff fer a spell, after he took Cactus his hoss. He saw Slade chinnin' with Link. He trailed some more when they tried to round Cactus up in the gulch. Cactus gits away after ruinin' Slade.

"The sheriff, with Dawson, an' another hombre, chase Cactus but the claybank is too good fer them. They come back to pick up what's left of Slade. Meantime Chuck gits softhearted an' tries to fix Slade up. Said he couldn't stand his moanin'. Chuck 'ud nurse a sick snake if it rattled to him. So the sheriff wants to know what is Chuck doin' an' accuses him of helpin' Cactus git away. An' that skunk Slade musta give him away. Leastwise, that's the way we figger it.

"Tom Dawson an' Chuck git personal. They talk some about arrestin' Chuck, an' he didn't see it thataway. He makes a break an' Dawson gits in the way. Chuck beats him to the draw, or shoots straighter. He downs Dawson but there's the sheriff an' the other deppity. Up comes Old Man Reynolds an' two more of the posse the sheriff brings along. They hear the shootin'. So did we, but Pete here had started fer here, 'an I was waitin' to foller. We got on the scene too late. They had Chuck handcuffed. He couldn't fight a small army. Neither could we."

"Brody'll raise hell with yuh fer not cuttin' Tom out," said Sanders.

"Oh, yeah? Too bad *you* wasn't there to handle it."

"Shut up," Red broke in. "Pete an' Latigo ain't fools. An' Brody'll git Chuck out of jail."

"I AIN'T so certain o' that," Pete told them. "We rode after 'em to Clavija. That's a good jail. Folks was asleep till word gits out thet young Dawson is dyin', an' they're bringin' in the killer. Hull town got awake all to once. They was even talkin' about lynchin' but the sheriff an' Old Man Reynolds stopped that. There was goin' to be a trial, an' there'd be a hangin' all right, if Tom Dawson cashes in, but it'd be legal. If Chuck had been caught rustlin', Reynolds wouldn't have interfered. It's up to Brody."

"What did yuh do about him?"

"Padilla sent a *vaquero* out to the HB. Padilla says they'll work on Chuck. Brody don't dare leave him in jail. He might talk too much."

"Chuck wouldn't talk."

"Mebbe not. But he'll swing if Dawson dies. An' even if Dawson lives they'll have Chuck landed in the pen."

"Brody'll git him out. He's got pull."

"It'll take plenty."

They were gloomy about it, as they had a right to be.

"I reckon I stirred all this up," Cactus said.

"Reckon you did," agreed Latigo. "It's all up to Brody. He'll be here before noon, or send some word. You kin tie to that."

They still had confidence in Brody. Brody was in the clear, so

far, would continue to be if Chuck did not talk; but it would not look well for Brody to interest himself too much in Chuck. There was already plenty of whispering about Brody. But he was still, to all appearances, a cattle dealer, if not a heavy breeder. He would be expected to line up with the owners, with Dawson's father, with Reynolds and the rest. He could not afford not to.

If he pulled any sort of coup it would have to be a good one.

Travis strolled about without anybody checking him. This thing that had happened to Dawson had set him apart again. He was an outlaw and they were outlaws. Some of them might have prices on their heads. That way they accepted him, but even if they did not openly blame him for what happened, they regarded him as a hoodoo.

Travis whistled to Agudo, and the claybank came to get its ears scratched. He looked at the bunch of cattle. They had brands that were only half-healed, the scabs still on where the running-iron had doctored the original marks.

They had once been Bar R steers, belonging to Reynolds. Now they were HB-Connected, would be when the brands were h e a l e d. Fifty primes. Twenty-five hundred dollars. It was no wonder that Reynolds talked about hanging rustlers.

Presently he went back to where the others still talked things over. But there was a change. They had got back all their nerve. The corn liquor was passing, they laughed and sprang crude jokes. Latigo offered Cactus a drink, grinned at him.

"Brody's on the way," he said. "We got a message from him. He's goin' to fix it."

"Chap brought the message must have flew," said Travis.

Latigo slapped his thigh. "Derned right he flew. There's the chap that brought the news, gittin' rewarded."

Travis looked to where a pigeon, trim, built for speed, was pecking grains of corn out of Pedro's hand.

"We keep a bunch of them homin' carriers here," explained Latigo. "Pedro looks after 'em. Brody takes a few at a time to his spread."

"It's shore smart," said Travis. It was a new trick to him. It showed the caliber of the man who had thought of using it.

"He'll be here round noon," Latigo went on jubilantly. "Then you'll hear what he's got up his sleeve."

They were almost friendly again, but Travis stretched himself out in the shade of a cabin, tilted his Stetson over his eyes, and seemed to sleep. He was not going to seem too eager to hear Brody's plans.

He dozed off for a little while. He was not missed. The rustlers were passing the jug. The shadows were short when he heard them stirring, saw them getting up.

Brody was riding across the valley on a black horse whose coat shone like jet. It was a magnificent animal, and the loss of his foot did not seem to bother Brody.

He had not come down the trail by which Travis had entered. He must have used the wider one, across the glen. He reined up as the men gathered, nodding to them, with the twitching grimace, remaining in his saddle as he talked to them.

CHAPTER V

The Hostage

"I WANT you boys should all behave yoreselves," he said. "I'm bringin' in a guest. A *lady* guest." He fixed them with his sardonic glance and burning gaze. "She'll be here in a few minutes," he went on. "Barrett's bring-

in' her. Parker's up at the draw. I'll tell yuh what happened. Looks like our luck is still in."

Travis could hear Brody plainly. If he had been able to, he would have joined the group. He did not like this mention of a girl brought into that place, among these men.

"I'll tell you how it happened," said Brody. "The news in Clavija is that young Dawson has got an even chance. His folks are with him. I got word through to Chuck to keep ridin' an' not pull leather. It seems young Dawson is crazy over Reynolds' daughter, Joan—"

His voice grew harsher. The hunch of Travis grew stronger.

"Both families approve the match. But Joan ain't at Clavija. Last night, while her dad was out huntin' Cactus here, she takes a pasear of her own. An' she never got back home. Two scoundrels found her out on the flats, both of them masked. They kidnaped her. It looked like a fine chance to get a nice sum in ransom money. Too good to be passed up. They might have been waitin' a long while fer a chance like that. Anyway, it happened along. They've got the girl. It turns out they are friends of Chuck."

Brody had his men puzzled, but Travis was seeing the light. Joan, on her way back from warning him, had been captured, brought here. His palm itched for the feel of his gun-butt, his trigger finger tingled. But this was no way to play against Brody's hand. Brody did not even know Travis was in the game.

Brody grinned. "You boys been drinkin' too much redeye," he jeered at them. "*I* was on the way home from Brasada last night with my HB boys. *We* ran across Joan Reynolds. I offered we should take her home, seein' she was alone on the flats at that time o' night. She refused. I figger she ain't got much use fer me, though we were right friendly once."

Travis sensed a personal note in Brody's talk.

"She left us," said Brody. "I got Barrett an' Parker to ride ahead an' cut in on her. They did, with their bandanners hitched up to their eyes. She made some fuss but she come along. We put her in the old line-cabin fer the night.

"Reynolds got home late. Didn't even know she was missin' till this mornin'. He was plumb worried when I met up with him in Clavija, but he was keepin' quiet about it, so fur. Fer one thing it 'ud be bad if word got to Tom Dawson in his condition. Another thing, talk might lead to scandal. He wanted to know if he could find out if his girl had been gallivantin', I reckon. He'd try to cover her."

TRAVIS felt himself tensing like a spring being wound by a key. Brody's leering insinuations were loathsome, primed with spite. The rustlers were still not clear about what had happened.

"I had prime news fer Reynolds. I'm damned if the kidnapers hadn't communicated with me. Wanted *me* to be the go-between. Figgered both sides 'd trust me. That's the way I stand, hombres. An' 'stead of money, these rascals wanted to swap Joan Reynolds fer Chuck."

They roared their approval. He held up his hand for silence. Travis saw a buckboard turn into the valley from the way Brody had come. There was a man driving but he saw no passenger. If Joan was there she was lying, bound and probably blindfolded, like a package, on the floor of the vehicle. The buckboard halted near the shack. Brody saw it, waved his arm to the driver.

"The girl would be worth a good sum in *dinero,* either as ransom, or they could git plenty fer her if they

sold her across the Border. I pointed that out to Reynolds. It seemed to sink in, deep. I had quite a confab with him, Sheriff Link an' Tom Dawson's dad; an' we got in touch with Jedge Henshall. Yuh see, Chuck was in account of Tom Dawson. Dawson was wonderin' already why the girl didn't come to see him. Askin' fer her. Doc said that bad news about *her* might mean *his* finish. It was quite a problem. But—we made the swap!"

They cheered him to the echo.

"We'll hold her in the shack across the valley while I'm go-betweenin' with the bandits, makin' final arrangements. You boys know Steamboat Rock in Painted Rock Canyon. Looks a lot like a steamboat, got a stone funnel an' all. But you all may not know thet funnel-stone is holler. It's a pothole ten foot deep. She'll be found there, at dawn. Not before. I'll be along, as the go-between. When they git her, I see they turn Chuck loose an' give him a reasonable time to git in the clear. He'll come here, an' lie low, like Cactus is doin'. Where is Cactus, by the way?"

CACTUS got up and sauntered toward Brody.

"Didn't seem like it was any of my party," he said, keeping his voice careless with an effort. "I don't aim to horn in."

Brody looked at him hard. "You're *in*," he said. "If you warn't asleep I reckon you got the drift of what I was sayin'. Latigo knows Painted Rock Canyon. You an' him'll take the girl there. You'll leave two hours after midnight. The rest of the boys'll be busy. It seems a shame to lose that ransom money. It won't be hard to git most of the Triangle D an' Bar R riders to go along to bring Joan Reynolds back. They'll be rarin' to cut sign on the kidnapers once they git the word. After *I* say the word. After Chuck has got start enough fer him to reach here.

"So it looks to me like a fine time to do a li'l cleanin' up. We ought to gather in a good bunch of primes from the Triangle D. Dawson told me he was aimin' to ship. We kind of combed the Bar R already. Rest of you rannies light out of here round midnight."

They cheered him again. They had known all along he would fix things, they told themselves, and here he had done it, fixed it so they would come out way ahead.

He sat looking at his men, taking their flattery in, as a god might sniff incense. He was masterful but he liked his pride tickled.

It never occurred to him to ask where Joan had been the night before. She would not have answered Parker or Barrett in any case. Now, definitely, Brody did not mean to let her dream he was responsible for her plight.

Fate, slipping him what he thought was the winning queen, had also dealt him a joker, and he did not know it.

He looked quizzically at Latigo and Cactus.

"You two come with me. Latigo's soured on wimmen. I don't know erbout Cactus, but I sure don't trust the rest of these hombres with a pritty young girl."

He made that seem a compliment and they grinned at him.

"Cactus, you sort of started all this mix-up. 'Count of you, Chuck got in the calaboose. The girl gits him out but she's got to be delivered in good shape, assure her dad she ain't been mistreated, that she's still a good girl—*sabe?* So fur as *we're* concerned."

Travis wanted to pull the jeering devil from the saddle, gunwhip him. But he managed to grin with the others.

"You an' Latigo watch her from now on. *Sabe?* You dump her in thet pothole, well before dawn. She can't git out, but it might be best to have her tied an' gagged. You don't hev' to keep her theterway while she's in the shack. Give her supper, if she wants it."

He had one more jest to toss to them.

"By the way, boys, I got real confidential with Reynolds an' Dawson. Quite like old times. They told me they sent fer a range dick from the C. P. A. last week. Expect him most any day. I ain't belonged to the 'sociation fer quite a spell, but I told 'em it was a good move. I said the rustlers had visited me considerable."

He joined in their guffaws.

If Brody knew, if any of them guessed, or even suspected for a single moment, why Cactus was there in the hideout valley, they would have riddled him, strung up his body to a tree.

He was playing a desperate game and he loved the hazard of it. Once a cowhand; now, Clem Travis, alias Maverick Joe, alias the Cactus Kid, was there as Travis, the ace range detective of the Cattlemen's Protective Association.

CHAPTER VI

The Roundup

JOAN REYNOLDS lay on the single bunk in the small shack. She strove to convince herself that all the men wanted from her was ransom, but there had been something infinitely sinister in the manner of the two masked riders who had thrown her, tied, into the old line-shack. She was stiff and numb before they had bundled her into the buckboard, still bound and blindfolded, and even gagged. They had removed the blindfold when they reached the valley.

She thought again of Travis, wondered what he would do if he knew of her plight.

The door was opened and somebody entered—one of the two men who were guarding her. She had heard them talking outside, one in a lower tone than the other. She had not been able to understand all they said. There had been some talk about eating. One of them was to go to his meal and bring food back for her.

She was healthy and young and she was hungry. Most of all she was very thirsty—she wanted a drink of water.

Now that man had gone, and the other—why was he coming in to her?

She could not see the man's face clearly as he came through the door, his back to the light, but she knew that lean, lithe body, the slight swing of his shoulders, the light walk. It was the man who had rescued her once—who had made her heart beat faster whenever she thought of him. Had he come to rescue her again? Or—

Travis opened the stubborn shutter on the one window, let in more light. His face was grim as he saw her lying helpless. He tenderly took off the gag from her bruised and swollen lips, then cut her bonds with his knife.

"A drink, please?" Her voice was only a hoarse whisper.

Travis went to the cold clear spring close by, filled and flushed the dipper that hung on a tree fork. The liquid came beaded through the sandy bottom, it bubbled a little as he took it inside.

To Joan it was heavenly nectar, soothing and reviving. He helped her to hold the dipper, for her hands shook. She looked up at him

when she had finished it, thanked him. Then she said:

"So you are a *robador,* after all."

He did not reply immediately. He brought her more water for her wrists, gave her his neckerchief for a towel. Her own was silk, and might do for a bandage. It had been used as her gag.

Then, he took from his boot his badge and folded identity warrant and showed them to her, told her he was the man her father was expecting.

She gave a great sigh of relief, not merely for herself, but for him, for the preservation of her own belief in him. She understood perfectly what he had been doing, also the risk he had run and was still running.

"I'm goin' to take off yore boots," he said. "Can't chafe yore legs right until I do. It may hurt."

It did, though he was gentle about it. Then he sat on the bunk and started to work. He knew she would get muscle cramps and he handled the job expertly while he told her all that had happened, all that was going to happen. He kept his eyes peeled for Latigo or any of the others who might interfere. He would have to deal with Latigo separately later on, as his plans called for action.

He saw clearly what he had to do and was confident of carrying through. It looked as if Brody's elaborate schemes might defeat themselves, after all. Meantime, Travis must not appear over friendly with the hostage.

"The simplest thing is to go through with the program up to a certain point," he said. "We'll be at Steamboat Rock in plenty of time. But 'stead of me an Latigo comin' back here, we'll meet yore dad an' the sheriff, with their party. Brody will be along. There'll likely be some argyment but it won't last long. They'll have Chuck, an' I'll have Latigo. Then we kin figger about the rustlers while you go on to Clavija."

"Why to Clavija?" she asked. "I'm headin' for the ranch, to have a bath and get to bed. Why should I go to Clavija?"

Travis flushed under his tan. "I understood Tom Dawson was wonderin' an' worryin' why you hadn't been to see him. I figgered it was natcherul yuh'd want to see him, first of all. Of course you need rest."

She looked at him eye to eye, color flooding her face, pale from fatigue.

"What's the idea about Tom Dawson and me? Where did you get it? Of course I'll go to see him, but I can't see it as a matter of life and death. He is nothing to me except a friend. He never will be. He has no reason to think otherwise."

All the time she was speaking her color came and went, but she regarded him steadily. Travis saw that she spoke deliberately. She wanted him to know. Latigo was coming, bringing a dish with food for Joan.

"THEN I reckon you haven't got a *querido,* at all," said Travis.

"I never said I had. I said *quien sabe,*" she answered softly. "You've helped a lot. I can sit up."

"Latigo'll expect me to go fer my chow. He ain't a bad sort. He won't bother yuh any. I'll be back soon as I kin."

Well before midnight, all the men except Pedro, Travis and Latigo started for the Triangle D. Travis had brought his horse to the shack. Latigo caught one up for the girl, with an extra saddle, rigged his own.

They set out at the time appointed, going up the wide trail. Joan was not bound. Travis pointed out the state of her wrists.

"She can't git away from us," he argued. "Brody said she couldn't climb out the pothole."

Latigo let it go. For all his animus against women, he was not hard-hearted. As for Travis, he had not the slightest intention of Joan ever going into the chimney pit of Steamboat Rock.

"Reckon the boys left the draw down," said Latigo. "You kin work it from the other side, but it ain't so easy an' they'll want it in place fer the steers."

When Brody had first mentioned the draw, Travis had thought he referred to some deep wash. Now he saw it was something else. The moon rode high and full, with light and shade almost as strong as day. It revealed plainly the mechanism Brody had used to conquer a natural obstacle and to provide a second way to and from the hidden valley that could be used at will.

The wide trail ended abruptly in a deep chasm in the side of the mountain, like the gash from a Titan's ax. Two hundred feet down, a creek flowed white and murmurous between walls that could not be climbed. The gap was well over twenty feet. It yawned, as a split or crack of the earth's rind that must have been caused by volcanic quake or upheaval, long ago.

At the end of the trail there were sheave-poles and booms with tackle for outhauling two sections of bridge that could be fastened side by side. They were twelve feet wide when put together, with a stout fence on each side. Cattle could be herded over it readily. And, when not in use, it could be raised like a medieval drawbridge, with the gash as moat, impregnable.

They rode over it, with the hoof sounds thumping on the planks.

"Some slick," said Latigo. "Brody's a wiz. Most folks 'ud quit when they saw that gorge, but not Brody. An' it ain't a marker to the other way in."

Travis was still wondering about that. He might want its secret badly inside the next few hours. He tried cleverly pumping Latigo but the latter was not to be drawn.

"If Brody wants you to know he'll tell yuh, he answered, and Travis did not try to press the matter.

The ride to Painted Rock Canyon was over a rough terrain. False dawn was lightening the sky, the moon and stars were paling when they entered the place. It was of the same fantastic formation as the monuments outside the entry to the hideout. Here they were parti-colored conspicuously in red and white with occasional darker bands of strata.

STEAMBOAT ROCK stood upon a spur of the cliff which was deeply eroded, its sharp prow to the desert.

"It ain't hard to git to," said Latigo. "Not like it looks, but we'll have to make it on foot. Reckon yuh'd best light, Miss."

"Never mind, Joan," said Travis, and did not notice he had called her by her first name. The girl did, and there came again the quickened beat of her heart. She caught the voice of Travis, tense with purpose.

Latigo sensed it to. He turned in his saddle to look at Cactus. Then his hand started to shoot to his gun-butt, checked in mid-air with an effort.

"I wouldn't do that, Latigo," Travis told him. "It's my play. I'm holdin' all the aces. Elevate yore hands or I'll have t' shoot."

"Jest who in hell are you ?" Latigo asked. Travis told him. "Well I'll be damned!" said Latigo. "An' yuh've

been playin' Brody fer a sucker right along. I quit."

Travis did not trust him too much. He kept him covered while the girl took Latigo's gun, covering him in turn, while Travis bound his wrists to the saddle-horn with latigo strips, bound his feet in the stirrups and lashed them together beneath the horse's belly.

Then they rode on together, with Latigo in the middle, as the night waned and the day came. They were in the mouth of the canyon when they saw trail dust.

It was quite a large party, and they came on swiftly. They were hard-eyed, all of them, eager to get the girl, to turn Chuck loose according to the hard bargain that had been driven, then to get on the track of the outlaws. Reynolds was along, with Dawson's father, the sheriff, and Brody, riding his black steed, secretly triumphant.

When they saw the three riders in the mouth of the canyon, it staggered them. Brody smothered a curse, not sure what was happening, save that something had gone wrong. He did not yet suspect treachery. He was too confident of his powers. But he was not at all sure he could protect Latigo and Cactus. He had bargained for Chuck.

Now these other two fools had got his instructions mixed up. He supposed they had got drunk. Captured, they might squeal, as he had been afraid of Chuck doing.

He could not expect these owners and riders, with the sheriff, to go farther than the actual letter of the agreement, now the girl was back.

The sheriff was the first to recognize Travis.

"By Gawd," he said, "that's the Cactus Kid! We got him. Wing out, boys. He's a slippery cuss. An' a nervy one. He's comin' ahead, an' the other rannie's tied."

Reynolds had spurred his mount, riding to meet his daughter. Joan had no spurs but she stirred up her horse, and they met ahead of the posse—if it could be called that.

Travis hung back with Latigo, watchful. He wanted Brody.

"What have those damn' skunks done to yuh, Joan?" demanded Reynolds.

"I'm all right, Dad. One of them saved me in the cloudburst."

"If he did, he wiped that out kidnapin', an' he'll swing!"

The others had come up with them, glad to see the girl unharmed. But their blood was hot. They began to murmur assent to Reynolds' tirade.

Brody looked at Latigo, who shook his head. He looked at Chuck, and then at the man he knew as Cactus, who appeared quite unperturbed.

"Daddy, he's the man you sent for. He's from the Cattlemen's Association. Those reward bills were faked. I've seen his credentials. Show them to him, Clem."

REYNOLDS stared in surprise. Joan's face went red as the rose. Travis' intimate name had come out unconsciously, but her father did not know that. Travis cut in.

"It's true. I've got my identity papers. I'm a range dick. I've got one of the rustlers, an' now we'll round up the rest. Brody towed you all out here while his undercover wide-loopers are cleanin' up on the Triangle D. But we'll git them too."

"Hell's bells!" Shouted Dawson. "Brody—"

Brody knew the game was over. He had lost the stakes. He would be lucky to save his life.

He had ridden out from Clavija that morning well pleased with himself and his coup. He had got nicely out of a bad hole, and he was making somebody else pay for his having been bothered. He had hu-

miliated Joan by her kidnaping. Today he would have Dawson's fat steers, and then he would again ravage the Bar R. Rustling Reynolds' beef had been his first salve for his hurt pride.

He was finely shaven, the only one in the posse. He had dressed with special care, and he wore two guns.

They were now the only cards he had to play. He had to get through the posse, up Painted Rock Canyon, then by trails he knew, get away to the hideout.

The scar on his cheek squirmed like some hideous living growth that clung there. His eyes glared. There was real madness in them. With this sudden setback, something had snapped in his brain. He would kill the man who had outwitted him.

He spoke to Chuck. "Git goin'." He did not care for Chuck's safety but though Chuck's weapon had not been returned to him he might divert attention, as Brody made his last play.

Chuck looked at him, shrugged his shoulders. He was not going to be made a sieve of. The jig was up.

"I'm thorugh. I'm tossin' in my hand," he said to Brody.

BRODY drew both his big Colts in a frenzy of mad speed that matched Travis' holster play. He snarled at Chuck, foam flecking on his lips.

"Think yuh'll git off by squealin', do you?" Brody yelled, and shot the defenseless Chuck through the head.

He drove in his spurs to the rowels' limit, dug in his knees, and the black horse charged open-mouthed, inspired by its master's fury. A rider snatched at one arm as Brody rode with his guns poised, muzzles up, and Brody flung lead at him that smashed his shoulder. The sheriff was next, on Brody's left. Brody blazed at him and the slug smashed through both bones in his forearm.

Travis was weaving through the milling posse to get his man. He also had two guns. Joan had given him the one taken from Latigo. She sat her borrowed horse a little apart, as her father had sternly ordered her. All was confusion for the moment, with the sheriff and another wounded, Chuck dead, Latigo a prisoner, but guarded by two riders.

Brody sent his black lurching to one side. He broke out of the mêlée with men still between him and Travis. Lead was sent after him but horses were plunging, riders blocked each other, and though Brody swayed once in his saddle, he straightened up. He was not badly hurt.

Travis—or rather Agudo—found an opening, and they raced after him. Travis could hardly believe what he saw. Brody was flinging lead at Joan. His convulsed face was that of a demon.

Travis got in a shot at last. Trail dust puffed up from Brody's side and spoiled his aim. His bullet went through the neck of Joan's mount, near the mane. It plunged, reared, and saved her life as Brody's next slug crashed through the skull of the horse, sent it down as if pole-axed, catapulting Joan from the saddle. She lay still, dead or stunned, as Travis drilled Brody through the chest.

It was too high to kill. It might be a mortal wound but nothing seemed to stop Brody in his devilish desire to slay the girl—and Travis.

They traded shots, and Travis felt a frightful blow on his skull that made him reel with the impact, while everything spun about him and flood waters seemed roaring in his head. Blood gushed, spattering and spurting over face and body.

He fought, with every reserve in soul and body, to stave off the end,

believing himself dying, striving to rally his senses for just one moment.

He gave Agudo the steel and the claybank leaped forward, crashing into the side of Brody's black just back of its shoulder. Travis could not see. Blood clogged his failing eyes, and seemed to him oozing from within.

Brody got him again. The slug plowed through the flesh and muscle of his lower arm, that lost Travis his second gun.

He thrust the other hogleg, his own, up against Brody's side and pulled the trigger, once, twice! He had no strength nor sense left for a third pull. The bullets surged through Brody's heart and lungs, they flattened against his ribs on the far side. They ruptured and exploded his vitals, as Travis slid, insensible, spouting blood, over the cantle of his saddle.

HE came back with his bandaged head on Joan's lap. His eyes smarted but they could see her, see the blue sky beyond her. His head throbbed splittingly but he could raise it. He was alive, by some miracle. He heard Reynolds speaking.

"Narrow squeak, Travis. Gouged your scalp above the ear. We got it stopped bleedin', got the wound in yore arm plugged. Yuh got off lucky."

"You're not hurt, Joan?" he asked.

"Just the wind all knocked out of me for a bit."

"How about Brody?"

"He's well on the way to hell, if he ain't arrived already. You sent him there," said Reynolds.

Travis tried to sit up, went dizzy, tried it again.

"Got to git to the hideout," he said. "Got to round 'em up, bring back the steers. They'll have crossed by now an' taken up the draw. But some of us should stay there, 'case they try to make a bolt of it when we come in the other way. After we find it," he added grimly. "I kin lead to the place, but we may have to starve 'em out or bridge the gorge. I—"

He staggered with weakness and loss of blood, with the shock of his wounds. An arm went about him. It was Joan's.

"You can't go," she said.

"Got to. They'll think somethin's wrong when Latigo an' me don't show up, or Brody. Might git away before we bottle 'em up. I got to clean up the job."

"Wait a minute," said the sheriff. "Latigo, you know the trick of how to git in, don't you?"

Latigo nodded.

"Well," drawled the sheriff, "I ain't promisin' yuh nothin' definite, Latigo. Yuh didn't do the actual kidnapin' an' yuh helped deliver Miss Joan. We might make things a bit easy fer you if yuh led us, an' got us inside. How about it?"

"It shore looks like this Cactus party had disrupted things," answered Latigo. "Mebbe if he'd git the 'sociation to sort of ease up on me, we could make a deal."

"I'll do the best I kin, Latigo," Travis agreed.

"Then let's go. Reckon the draw *will* be up. We'll go there first. Then to where Travis went in. That is sure a lulu of a trick." Latigo grinned. His mind was easier. There had been many moments when he believed that if a tree had been handy they would have lynched him.

"Believe it or not," he went on, "it's done with mirrors. Or ruther with one mirror. Brody says he got the idee in some sort of magic show where a gal disappears in a cabinet with you seein' the contraption empty.

"Only you don't see it thataway. You jest see one side an' the rest is reflection. The gal's behind a

slantin' mirror. So, Brody erdopts the gen'rul idee. There's a cave, not very wide or high. Thet's at the end of a short canyon, *sabe?* Part of the cave is shaller but there's an openin' goes plumb through to the inside trail. Brody chips off the openin' till it's trued-up like a door. He fixes up a mirrer so it covers the openin', an' reflects the shaller part. Ten foot erway you'd swear there was no way in. The mirrer swings on a swivel, like, an' it locks. It's easy to open when you know the trick. Plenty room fer a rider to go through."

Travis stared at Latigo with the rest. It was a slick trick, and a simple enough one. Nobody would investigate a palpably shallow and empty recess in the cliff.

"I want to look at it," he said. "I kin ride."

"You'll ride to the ranch," growled Reynolds. "Joan'll go with yuh. You ain't got blood enough in yore body to fill up a child. I'm holdin' you responsible fer him, Joan. You're both of you played out. All *we* got to do is haze in the rustlers, an' bring back the steers."

It was true enough. Travis was too weak to argue. But Reynolds was wrong about his loss of blood. There was enough of it left in him to bring up his pulsebeats when he looked at Joan. Her eyes were shining with soft radiance, her lips a little parted.

"You want to accept that responsibility?" he asked her as the others prepared to start.

"For how long do I have to accept it?"

"I reckon it'll be fer life. How about it, Joan?"

"I'll tell you—better—when they've got out of sight," she said. And did.

IN NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

WOLVES OF THE RANGE

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—and Many Other Romantic Stories of the West

You start off with 2 strikes

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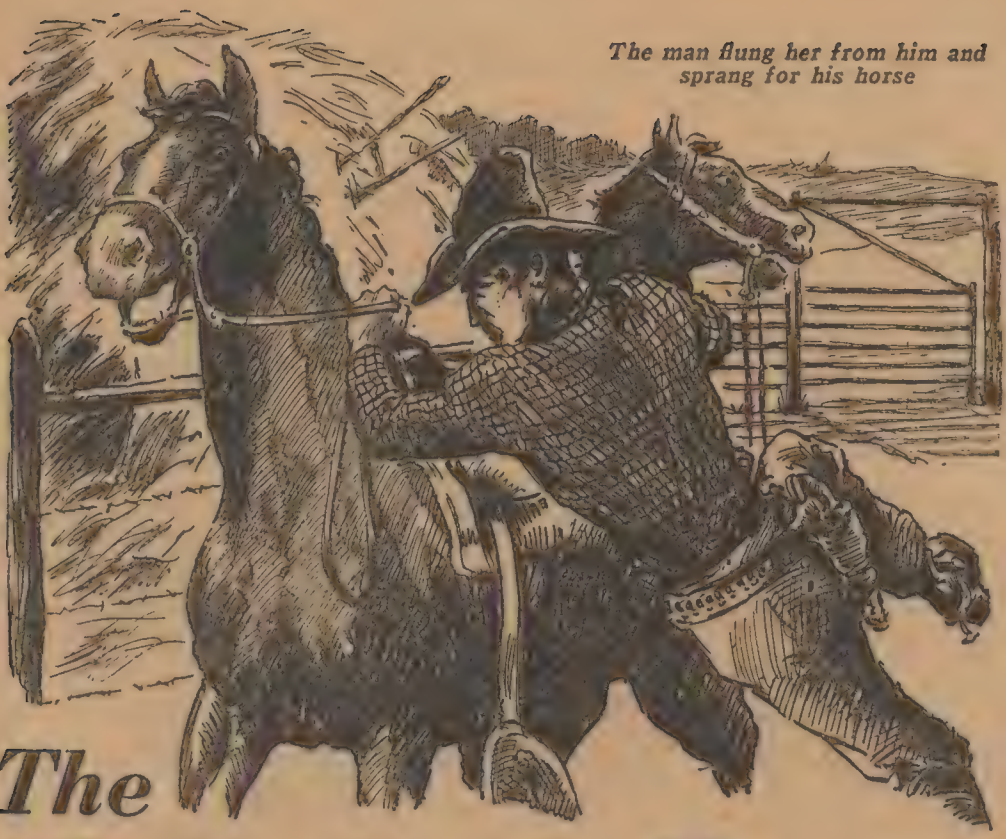


The man flung her from him and sprang for his horse

The Man *from* Pecos

A Complete Romantic Novelette

By WESTMORELAND GRAY

Author of "Six-Gun Lochinvar," "Ghost-Town Tryst," etc.

CHAPTER I

Dave Callier Arrives

"DO you see anything of him?" the old man asked plaintively from his bed in the corner.

The girl looked compassionately at her father, shook her head, then turned back to her vigil at the window. The room was oppressively silent except for Cass Wing's low muttering.

He lay in bed, one bandaged, splinted leg propped high above the covers—bullet-pierced, bone-splintered. He glared as it accusingly, for it was the cause of his helplessness. Flat on his back—in the predicament he and Betty now found themselves! If only Dave would come—in time.

Dave Callier Rides to the Border Range on

Dave Callier! There was a man to bet on. Son of old Buck Callier, who had been Cass Wing's neighbor and crony before Cass and his daughter had moved down here on the Border. Buck Callier had passed on, but young Dave, so the word passed, was a son worthy of his father.

Betty Wing was thinking of Dave Callier, too. He would come, she

Dave answered in a fast salvo

a Whirlwind Errand of Whistling Lead!

told herself, and he'd be the one man capable of handling the situation. In the five years since they had left the Pecos country, Betty had never quite forgotten Dave Callier. And she believed he had not forgotten her. But there was an ugly little shadow of doubt in Betty's mind about Dave Callier.

Hugh Masters, their nearest ranch neighbor, had planted it there. He had told her that the rangeland rumor was that Callier had gone bad in the last two years—turned outlaw.

For three days and nights, hour on hour, Betty Wing had stood by the window, watching. An old Sharps rifle leaned against the wall by her hand. Sometimes she picked it up and fired through a small loophole in the wall, when she thought she saw a peaked sombrero among the jagged rocks which faced the house, or a furtive movement in the catclaw and piñon which fringed the clearing.

TWICE Betty had tried to leave the house. Rifles had cracked from among the rocks and bushes—and bullets had whined close about her. Now she just stared out, her pretty, sun-tanned and healthy face dreadfully anxious.

The sight that met her eyes was anything but reassuring. In the small bar-wired pasture east of the log ranchhouse were close-packed all of the 2 Bar W cattle, belonging to her father. They had been rounded up four days ago and herded in there, where they could be guarded. Then there had been water in the small surface tank and three great haystacks for feed.

Now the tank was dry and the haystacks were but ugly black mounds on the ground. The first night one of the raiders had sneaked in, burned the hay, and cut the tank dam.

Cass Wing, going out to try and save some of the hay, had been wounded by ambushed guns.

The afternoon before, Wing's three cowboys had deserted. Heretofore loyal, hard-working, they had ridden out looking for strays, and had not returned. One thing they had to be thankful for—that last week Cass Wing had sent that letter to Dave Callier.

It was pitiable now to hear the desolate bellow and moaning of the cattle, maddened by hunger and thirst, to see them milling and piling against the shining barb-wire, desperate to spread over the lush graze and get at the fine spring-fed waterholes of the 2 Bar W.

"I sorta feel like we oughta turn 'em out," Cass Wing said.

Betty shook her head. "Even if I could get out there to let them out," she said, "you know they'd just fall prey to those rustlers and bandits."

She said it bitterly. Those rustlers were the Mexican-garbed, masked creatures who had been terrorizing the 2 Bar W for the last two months.

Suddenly Betty's figure straightened. Faint, fast hoofbeats had come to her over the noise of the cattle. Her gaze went southwest, through the only opening in the timber and rock that surrounded the house.

Half a mile distant a rider was topping the rise. A little pang of joy made Betty's heart hurt for an instant. That rider's figure, something in the confident way he rode, was familiar. Betty knew. She knew. She wanted to shout for joy as the rider came at a headlong gallop toward the ranchhouse.

"Dad!" she cried, her eyes shining, hope flooding her voice. "He's coming! It's Dave Callier!"

"Thank heaven!" Cass Wing said. "I knew the son of Buck Callier wouldn't let us down. The Lord has sent us a *man,* I'm betting, to help us fight our battles. If—if only

one of them cussed drygulchers don't pick him off before he gets here."

A sharp, anguished cry from Betty drew the old man almost bolt upright in the bed.

"He's turned off the trail—he's not coming to the house! Oh, Dad! He's cutting the pasture wire—he's driving off our cattle!"

"Steady, Betty," Cass Wing pleaded. He tried to rise but fell back.

Betty jerked up the rifle. She flung open the door in defiance of the treacherous guns which might be hidden up in the rocks.

The sharp, vengeful sound of her shots beat on the air. She aimed, fired, and aimed again at the horseman who was so busy now, furiously hazing the 2 Bar W cattle from the pasture. No sniping guns fired at her. The man in the pasture paid her no heed.

She ran out in the yard, sped along the lane through the clearing space. She stopped every few feet to fire. For the rider was fast going up the first incline now, driving the cattle madly away. Tears were streaming down Betty's face, tears of anger and frustration. To think that Dave, the one man they had depended on, the man she almost thought she loved during all these years, could have done this thing to them!

Man and cattle went over the rise, and out of sight. But Betty ran on in futile pursuit.

Hoofbeats came drumming back her way. Again a rider topped the ridge. The same rider! Dave Callier!

He saw her. He spurred hard and came galloping down at her, full tilt.

He never slowed. Sudden fear gripped Betty as the man on the great roan thundered toward her, never slacking speed. She cried out and leaped aside, but in that second Dave Callier swerved slightly, swung far from the saddle, grasped the girl in his arms—and swung her from the ground. Then she was in the saddle with him, and the horse was plunging on toward the ranch-house.

For a moment Betty fought back. But his arms felt so safe, so secure, that she quieted.

"Why—why did you drive off our herd?"

"To save 'em. A gang was going to rustle the herd. I had to ride hard to beat 'em to it. Scattered the cattle in the brush. We can round 'em up again—and the gang can't steal the whole herd."

Suspicion still lurked in Betty's mind. It didn't sound reasonable. "I don't believe it!" she flared.

"Don't yuh? I'm powerful sorry. But I won't argue. Ain't time. Right now we got to get into the house and get ready. A raid's coming. Reckon it's almost on my heels. They're gonna attack the house."

"How do you know all this?"

"I've scouted around some."

The roan's hoofs hammered into the hard-packed back yard. Dave lifted Betty to the ground, flung himself out of the saddle. He jerked his rifle out of the saddleboot, unstrapped the saddle bags, heavy with ammunition.

"GET into the house fast, Betty. Get all the guns and cartridges in the house into the front room. The Mex-dressed skunks are gonna be ramming down on the place any minute. Hurry, there ain't no time to lose!"

Still doubting him, Betty ran to obey. His voice was commanding, carried authority.

Dave stripped the saddle from the roan, slapped the animal on the rump to send it trotting toward the corral. Then he entered the rear door, barred it behind him.

In the front room he went to the

bed in the corner, grasped Cass Wing's hand.

"I got yore letter, Cass. Got here soon as I could. I'm powerful sorry about the fix yuh're in. Aim to help yuh if I can."

Betty looked at him. He spoke simple, straightforward words.

"I learned something about yore trouble when I came through La Cabeza. So I rode onto yore range with my weather eye out. I spotted some Mexican hombres what looked suspicious and trailed 'em to where they had a sorta caucus. Slipped up and heard 'em talking.

"They was going to raid yore ranchhouse, burn it, and steal the cattle yuh had pastured up ready for 'em. When they rode out, I whipped a c i r c l e 'round 'em—and Betty knows the rest.

"I figger we can put up a fight here and hold 'em off. Some of them been watching the place, I'm right sure, and it wouldn't do no good to try to get away."

"We'll put up our fight here," Cass Wing said simply, but with grim determination. "This is our home and we don't aim to be drove out of it. Betty's a right good gun-hand. And I can help some, Dave. With a little help I can make out to sit up—and shoot through a loop-hole!"

CHAPTER II

Accusations

DAVE CALLIER grinned. Betty looked at him then, and at his lean, strong-carved face, his steady eyes, and tall, active, graceful figure. How could she not depend on him, when he smiled like that, so reassuringly?

"Same old fighting Cass," Dave said. "I've heard Dad talk about yore smoke parties." Dave conquered a huskiness in his voice, then went on: "Right now we got to get ready for 'em. Betty, yuh watch out front for sign, and I'll get all forted up, and load up all the guns. While we're at that, Cass, yuh tell me what-all's been happening to yuh—and who's behind it."

"I ain't right sure I know," Cass Wing said. "It's masked Mexican rebels—all we've got a peek at. About four months ago I had a *vaquero* working for me, a half-breed called Chihuahua Joe. I caught him stealing yearlings and when I called his hand he come at me with a knife. I had to shoot him, broke his arm. He swore vengeance. Said he belonged to a rebel party below the Border—that they'd come back and run me off the range.

"I wasn't much scared, for Chihuahua Joe disappeared. Then I learned he did belong to a bunch what raided both sides of the line, givin' honest ranchmen hell."

"Did he come back?"

"Looks mighty like it. About the time Chihuahua Joe's arm would be getting well these here raids started on me. They drove off bunches of my cattle—killed some, just plain malicious. They sniped at my riders. Burned my hayfields. Poisoned a couple of my water holes. They drove me near crazy, I tell you, Dave, and about had me plumb broke."

"Did you fight 'em back, Cass?"

"We done our best—but what can a little outfit do in this kind of country? There wasn't any law to go to and I had only three men. It's hard to fight back at night riders. They're here one minute and gone the next.

"Well, I had my three cowboys bring all the cattle I had left into that little pasture, 'cause we was losing the critters something hurtful, Dave. Then my men quit on me."

"How yuh mean quit?"

"Just rode off and didn't come back. Reckon I don't blame 'em,

none. Looked like I was a goner as a rancher. Their pay wasn't any too regular or sure, and I know I'd shore got tired o' being bedeviled and sniped at like they was."

"Wouldn't yore neighbors throw in with yuh?"

DAVE had finished his work on the guns, and stood dividing his gaze between Cass Wing on the bed, and Betty's rigidly stiff back at the front window. There was hurt in Dave Callier's face. This girl distrusted him—and that was like a knife thrust into his soul.

"This ain't like the Pecos country, Dave. It's thin settled, and mostly dog-eat-dog amongst those that do live here. I haven't got any neighbors except Hugh Masters. He's got the O Bar 6 brand—a powerful big spread. He's been friendly enough with us—but he ain't courting any trouble with the Mex rebels. He says once the raiders gets down on a ranchman there ain't no end to his troubles. I almost believe him."

"Hm. How about yore homestead right? Is it proved up yet?"

"Just three more months. That's why I hate like hell to give up now. Yuh don't know what a struggle me and Betty have had, Dave, to keep going here. And now, with my homestead time nearly up—well, that's why we've fought the buzzards to hold on."

Dave frowned and looked down at his hands. He knew something about what ranching in a pioneer land meant.

"How's yore graze—and water?"

"Best water in this country. And grass grows waist high on my best range—grama, the kind that sure fats cattle."

A queer gleam came into Dave Callier's eyes. "And Hugh Masters has been trying to buy yuh out, hasn't he?"

"Yeah. But he didn't make no reasonable offer. And I wasn't in no mind to sell."

Dave did not speak for a long time. "Are yuh right sure, then, that this half-breed, Chihuahua Joe, is behind all yore troubles?"

Betty spoke up. "He's leading the bandits. I've got glimpses of him once or twice since the house has been besieged."

Wing demanded: "What yuh driving at, Dave?"

Dave stepped forward and looked down at the old man. His mouth was a grim, ugly straight line.

"Jest this. Those hombres I trailed didn't look much like Mexicans to me. Oh, they was dressed like greasers, all right. Peaked sombreros. Split pantaloons. And they was swarthy—but lots of folks are dark in this country. I got a strong hunch somebody else is playing a deep game with yuh, with Chihuahua Joe doing the dirty work.

"And I'll tell yuh something else. Yore men didn't desert you. From what I overheard, they been made prisoners—being held in those bandits' hideout."

"My gosh!" Wing cried. "Yuh mean Hugh Masters is hiring these cutthroats to drive me off, so he could have the 2 Bar W water and graze?"

"That's the way it looks to me," Dave said quietly.

There was silence in the room after that.

A raid had been planned against them, and they were as well prepared as possible to meet it. The doors were heavily barred, most of the windows stoutly barricaded with furniture. Two Sharps rifles, a Winchester and four revolvers were fully loaded, and a supply of ammunition was handy.

There was nothing they could do now but watch and wait. Watch and wait in dread suspense.

But nothing happened. Two hours passed and still no sign came of the

attack which Dave Callier had predicted. Even the snipers who had had the place under surveillance for the past three days seemed to have deserted.

At her window, Betty's eyes grew bitter. Her suspicions against Dave Callier returned, more formidable than ever, and began to crystallize.

Going back over what he had said, his explanations to her had seemed lame and halting. He admitted he had been in contact with the bandits. Maybe he had been hand in glove with them!

Suddenly she whirled on Dave, her eyes blazing.

"You lied to us! You told us we were to be raided, so we would stay here and not go after our cattle—which you turned out and drove right into the hands of your henchmen. Dave Callier, you're despicable! Who's paying *you* to rob us?"

Dave drew back from her fury. He looked as if she had slapped him in the face.

"Betty! How can yuh say things like that?"

The girl broke into sobs.

Cass Wing said stoutly: "Dave Callier's shooting square, Betty. He's old Buck Callier's son. I reckon yuh're some overwrought, Betty girl. And no wonder—seeing what you been through!"

The beat of hoofs out front broke in on the tense tableau. Betty whirled sharply to stare out the window, and Dave looked over her shoulder.

A man was riding at a trot up the front gate. He sat erect in the saddle, more like a cavalryman than a range rider. He swung easily, arrogantly, to the ground and started up the walk.

"It's Hugh Masters," Betty said, and turned to stare at Dave, to see the effect of this information on him. But beyond a certain grimness about Callier's eyes and mouth the girl could read nothing.

CHAPTER III

The Good Neighbor

BETTY unbarred the door, and Hugh Masters entered. He was handsome, in a dark, heavy way, and carried himself straight as an arrow. He was probably thirty-five, with a splendid physique, built much like Dave Callier.

Dave Callier studied the man's face, and if he could read aright, there were mockery and hardness in it—and treachery.

"I'm mighty sorry to hear about the trouble yuh folks are in," Masters said.

Dave moved out of the shadow. "More help and less sympathy might be better from you, Masters. Yuh've got a big force of men, and could have aided Wing before now to fight off the rustlers bedeviling him."

Masters glared a moment at Dave. "Why, hello, Callier!" he exclaimed. "I didn't know *you* were coming here."

Betty turned sharply to Dave. "You—you know each other?"

Dave nodded. "I stopped at the O Bar 6 ranchhouse to make some inquiries about the trail."

"Yuh did a little more than that, didn't yuh, Callier?"

Dave straightened abruptly. He seemed to tower, and his eyes became bleak. "What do yuh mean by that, Masters?"

Masters stared a moment, then shrugged.

"Let it go," Masters returned. "Yuh asked me why I didn't throw in and help defend the 2 Bar W. Yuh don't know this Border country. I've got along for years here. If I turned openly against the rebel element that infests the Border—they'd ruin me and drive me out in a month. But what about yore cattle, Wing? I heard yuh had 'em

penned up here and under guard."

"I turned 'em out, drove 'em off, scattered 'em," Dave said tersely. "Not so easy for rustlers to steal the herd now."

A sudden change came in Masters' manner. He glowered at Dave, rocked back on his heels.

"Say!" he cried with rising inflection. Then before Dave could bat an eye, Masters' hand swooped to his holster, flipped out his gun. Dave stared into its bore.

"Get 'em up, Callier!" Masters' eyes glinted dangerously. "Up—*quick!*"

DAVE was caught completely unaware. He had no choice but to obey.

"Miss Betty," Masters said rapidly. "This man came here to rob yuh and yore Dad. He sold me a herd of cattle today to be delivered week after next. I jest realized this minute—it's the same herd he stole from you this afternoon!"

"That's a lie, Masters!" Dave roared, half lowering his hands.

"Get yore hands back up!" Masters gritted. "I've got the proof, Miss Betty. Got the bill of sale right here with me. Stand away from all that artillery, Callier. And don't move. Take his gun, Miss Betty."

Surprises were coming too fast for Betty to cope with. Almost automatically she obeyed Masters. Dave's eyes pleaded with her, but she did not look at him. Then he stood against the wall, disarmed.

With his left hand Masters drew a paper from his pocket, extended it to Betty. With blurred eyes she read it, and was filled anew with contempt for the man who had come to them as a friend in their need.

It seemed to clinch Dave Callier's treachery—treachery against a helpless old man and his troubled daughter. It was the contracted sale of a herd of cattle branded Q Box W to Hugh Masters, and was signed, "David Callier."

"Take note of that brand, Miss Betty," Masters said coldly. "Figger how easy it would be to change yore 2 Bar W into it. I never guessed the truth until I learned he'd driven off yore herd."

"If that paper is signed in my name it's a forgery," Dave said in a voice of ill-repressed fury.

Betty looked at him with loathing. Why did he stand there and try to deny his obvious guilt? And how did he think Hugh Masters could have known or guessed enough about this situation to have framed and forged this paper?

"Now Miss Betty," Masters went on. "Yuh need me and I'm going to throw in with yuh. Guess I'm able to stand the consequences. First, we'll tie this traitor up and take all these guns away, so he won't have any chance to do harm to yore father Then we'll go over to my ranch and bring back ten men. If those Mex cutthroats strike at yuh again—they'll get a mighty big surprise."

Betty's face brightened with hope greater than she had known in months. Under Masters' gun, Dave submitted to being trussed up.

"Betty Wing," he said huskily, "yuh're playing the fool—playing right into Masters' hands. This buzzard is in cahoots with those bandits—he's their paymaster. He wouldn't have knowed all about this business if he wasn't. If yuh leave me disarmed like this and go with Masters—yuh'll be in his power and there'll be nobody here to protect the ranchhouse. Masters' cutthroats can raid it, burn it, kill yore Dad."

"*You* should tell me what to do!" Betty said furiously.

Dave saw Hugh Masters gather up all the weapons. Then the rancher took Betty's arm and steered her toward the door. Masters could not refrain from a leer of triumph as

he looked back at the man from the Pecos.

Then the door closed behind the pair, and the room was in tragic silence.

Dave groaned. He knew that Masters' move now would be to have his henchmen—disguised as Mexican rebels and headed by the revenge-mad Chihuahua Joe—attack the ranchhouse and destroy it, along with himself and Cass Wing. Then, with Betty utterly in Masters' power—

CASS WING stirred in his bed. A hoarse whisper went across the room to Dave.

"Dave! I didn't dare say anything while that snake was here. He fooled Betty, but he didn't fool me! It'd take more'n a scrap of paper and a pack of lies to destroy my trust in Buck Callier's son. Did he take yore pocket-knife?"

"No—it's still here in my pocket."

Wing said: "Roll over by the bed. I can make out to reach over and get yore knife—cut yore hands free. We'll have to work fast!"

Dave rolled across the floor. Grimacing with pain, Wing dragged his body to the edge of his bed, carefully favoring his bad leg. Wing's groping hand found Dave's pocket, finally brought out the knife. It took but seconds to open it and cut the bonds on Dave's hands. Then Dave quickly freed his feet.

"Masters took all the guns," Dave said glumly.

"Not all of 'em. There's a six-gun under my pillow. Grab it—go get him. Don't let that skunk get away from here with Betty!"

With gun in his holster, Dave Callier stepped through the door. His face was hard as granite—not good to look at. Hugh Masters had brought Betty's horse from the corral. The two were now just beyond the front gate, ready to mount.

"All right, Masters. Yore bluff's called. Grab sky—or *start shooting!*"

Betty cried out. Masters whirled, saw what was about, instantly grabbed the girl and thrust her in front of him. From up in the rocks beyond the clearing a rifle cracked out viciously. Its slug whirred by Dave and smacked into the wall of the house. He paid no heed.

He started walking deliberately, relentlessly, toward the gate. More shots came from up among the rocks some of them perilously close.

"If yuh don't turn Betty loose before I reach yuh, Masters—I'm going to kill yuh in yore tracks!"

A measured, deadly fusillade came from the hidden snipers. Dave walked straight through it. Now he was within twenty feet of the gate.

Betty began struggling with the man who held her, for she saw now how she had been duped. Those rifle shots at this turn of the affair could only mean that Hugh Masters was in cahoots with the snipers.

The man flung her from him and leaped for his horse. It reared and plunged as his foot caught the stirrup. Dave fired, but Masters had already heaved himself into the saddle. He gouged his spurs deep and the horse plunged away.

At fifty yards, he twisted in the saddle and fired back at Dave. Dave answered the shots in a fast salvo. But the galloping rider was a poor target and Dave's shots went wide.

"Get back into the house!" Dave ordered the girl! He stampeded her horse toward the corral, gathered up the guns Masters had tried to take. Turning, he ran along behind the girl, protecting her. Rifles still cracked from the palisaded rocks, tracing the pair across the yard.

They ran into the front room, slammed and barred the front door.

"I hope," Dave panted, "yuh've done got all the fool notions outa yore head about me."

Betty was speechless and contrite. He handed her a piece of paper,

taken from his pocket, and rasped:

"There's the way I sign my name. Does that look like the signature on that paper Masters had?"

The girl shook her head.

"I hope yuh're convinced now that Masters is the one who's trying to drive yuh off yore range. I guessed it when I stopped at Masters' house—because it was close to there that I struck the trail of them Mexican-dressed hombres. And yuh almost played into the coyote's hands!"

"Dave, I'm sorry," Betty sobbed. "You just don't know how things looked—for a minute." She put her hand on Dave's arm.

Dave's voice softened. He grinned.

"Okay, lady. Now we got to figger out a way to fight back. Because that last was Masters' trump card, I reckon. Now he'll turn in and try to smoke us out—pronto."

"He'll find us hard to smoke," Betty Wing said.

But the raiders did not strike at once. Dave propped Cass Wing up in bed, and pushed the bed across the room to a loophole in the west half of the front wall. He placed a six-gun and a rifle, with ammunition, on the bed beside him.

"They'll surround the house," Dave said grimly. "You and Betty guard the front. I'll stand 'em off at the back and sides."

Taking a six-gun and a rifle, Dave went through the dining room, into the kitchen. By dividing his time between window and window, he could watch the north, east and west sides of the ranchhouse.

Thus they stood ready, awaiting the attack.

Until this moment, Dave had never known what the strange longing was that had been in his heart for five years—ever since Betty Wing had moved from the Pecos country.

Without warning the enemy struck, riding like war-mad Comanches out of their coverts in the jagged rocks and rank brush, firing, yelling, blazing away at the sturdy log ranchhouse.

A barrage of screaming lead met them as they charged the house, front and rear. But they came on, reached the yard fence in front, the corral at the rear.

Inside the house, Betty and Dave and Cass Wing worked their guns until they became hot and fuming in their hands. The house was filled with powder smoke; the three defenders moved in eddying wreaths of it, and it hung against the ceiling like a thick black cloud.

CHAPTER IV

The End of Chihuahua Joe

AT LEAST nine riders, possibly ten, were in that phalanx which charged the house. Dave Callier went from window to window in the rear and side walls of the house, pouring out deadly fire.

One rider came charging right up to the rear gate before Dave's bullet knocked him from his horse. The man tried to drag himself away, but after a moment he lay still.

Window glass crashed out and lay in fragments on the floor. Some of the bullets cut through the chinks in the logs, ripped through the pine inner walls of the house, and whistled weirdly through the rooms.

"How's it coming up there?" Dave called to the front, above the roar of the guns.

"I've cured two hombres permanent of their meanness, with lead," Cass Wing answered grimly. "And Betty has turned two back."

The attack broke but rallied, came on again, and once more the ugly rattle of guns filled the air. This time two horsemen hurdled the front fence, rode across the yard and flung a flaming torch at the house.

It fell short, but Dave had to quit

the rear and rush to the front and pour a blistering fire at the advancing men before they were turned back, for others were galloping up behind them.

Again the raiders retired for cover. Chagrin filled the three in the little ranchhouse. They faced tragedy, stark and real. Ammunition was running low. Another concerted attack like this—and there would be no powder to fight back with.

But for a brief moment when the whole raiding party had been in the open, Dave Callier got a brief glimpse of a figure which set his mind racing and gave him hope. A figure who rode erect in the saddle—like a cavalryman! Hugh Masters. Masked and disguised now as a Mexican peon—Masters himself was leading the raid against the Wings!

A plan came into Dave's mind—a desperate plan. If he could slip out, creep to the brush and rock ramparts of these marauders, capture Masters, and bring him back to the ranchhouse—

THERE came a lull in the firing. Dave said: "I'm going to slip out, Betty. Gonna try to get my hands on Masters. He's leading this."

"They'll kill you!" Betty cried.

Dave grinned. "I ain't ever been killed yet. While yore Dad guards the front, you guard the back. I'll try to make a run for it."

But the moment Dave opened the rear door, a hail of rifle fire greeted him, ripping into the log walls and the pine woodwork of the door. It tore at his clothing and cut a slit in one boot. A little trickle of blood ran down his leg inside the boot. Dave leaped back, slammed the door, barred it.

"Where's a hammer—or a prisebar, quick?" Dave demanded.

Betty showed him the tool shelf in the kitchen. Dave moved to a west window and peered out. Then he knelt and with the hammer ripped up a plank in the floor, and another.

He caught up a lariat from a peg on the wall, took two full-loaded six-guns—one in his holster and another in his belt—and climbed into the hole he had made.

"I'll be back as quick as I can," he called to Betty. "Hold 'em off—hold 'em off, whatever happens—till I get my paws on Hugh Masters!"

Then he was gone, crawling beneath the floor. He reached the west edge of the house and peered out. A rank row of blackberry bushes ran aslant the yard to the fence. From there onto the heavy brush west of the clearing led a narrow lane, bordered on each side with foliage.

Dave crawled out. Pressing flat and under the tangle bushes, he dragged himself along, literally on his stomach.

He reached the fence and inched along to the gate without drawing fire. Rifles cracked spasmodically, but none were aimed at him. Once out in the lane, he crawled on all fours. It was perilous business. If any of those furtive, hidden gunmen saw him, sudden lead would snuff out his life. Then one rush would take the house. Dave winced at the thought.

Somehow he got through unseen. Into the jumbles of boulders and cliffs among which the enemy scurried. He could hear their stealthy movement as they twisted into new positions from which to attack.

Finally he climbed to the rim of a higher cliff, a rim fringed with chaparral. He parted this and peered out. He saw horsemen scattered in a hidden circle around the house. They were disposed behind brush clumps, in the crevices of rocks, between jagged boulders. And then he spotted the erect figure whom he sought. Masters sitting his horse a hundred yards south, beside the very cliff on which Dave hid!

Dave crept along the rim, pressed in the cover of the brush. He heard Masters call to his men. Then he raised his arm in a signal which started them all shifting toward the front. All of them except one—the one unmasked man of the gang—Chihuahua Joe. He remained crouched behind a rock outcrop in the rear of the house.

Now Dave was directly above Masters. He stepped to the very lip of the ledge. He swiftly fed out a loop of his lariat.

Masters turned, saw him, and uttered a sharp cry. But the next second Dave's loop zipped through the air, caught Masters about the neck, jerked tight—and choked off his frantic yell for help. Another swift yank and Masters tumbled from his horse.

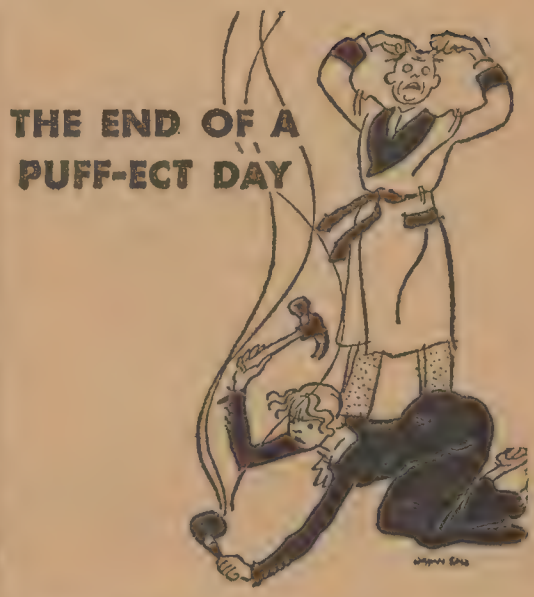
Dave leaped. He landed on top of Masters, who was scrambling up, clawing at his throat. Hatred for this man and his deeds had been pent up in Dave so long that it clamored for fierce expression. He swung once at the masked face and that once was enough. Masters sagged limp as a bag of meal.

Dave stared at the man, debating briefly. Masters had to be out for some time. Dave grimly took his gun, tapped Masters across the skull, then turned to other work.

He took the rifle from the ground where it had fallen; then shouldering the insensible man and the guns, he started climbing a trail which led to the top of the cliff. It would take all of Dave's strength and skill to sneak back to the house as he had come, dragging Masters with him.

Before Dave reached the ledge, the mad hammering burst of rifle fire broke out. The gang was charging the front of the house again. But he felt confident Betty and Wing could hold off this one rush. Dave hastened to the ridge where he could see what was happening.

He saw the outlaws charging



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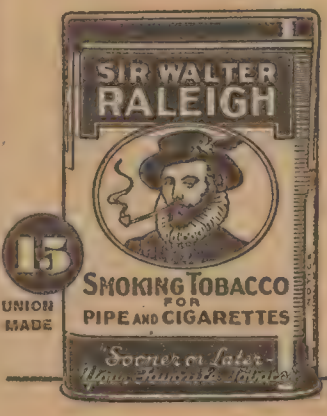

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against the front, turning back, charging again, in a frenzied mêlée, literally riddling the ranchhouse walls with lead. He saw something else, something which made him gasp with horror.

While Betty and Wing were fighting the concentrated raid at the front the back of the house had been unguarded. Chihuahua Joe had crept to the rear stoop, a blazing ocatillo stick in each hand. He was firing the house. Another second and his devilish work would be done.

Dave Callier's scheme went glimmering. If he shot Chihuahua Joe from here all chance of his regaining the house by stealth was gone.

Dave did not hesitate. He dropped Masters' body. To get a bead on the halfbreed, he had to step from the brush into the open.

He stood exposed, threw the rifle to his shoulder and fired, and fired again, until Chihuahua Joe lay sprawled and lifeless and his firebrands sputtered harmlessly on the ground.

CHAPTER V

End of Trouble

HE was given no respite. His firing drew the attention of the raiding outlaws, and some of them spied him as he leaped back into the brush.

In a flash the guns of the attackers turned on him, flailed the foliage as he ducked low and rolled. Now the horsemen themselves were turned about, coming for him, the house momentarily forgotten.

They came treading through the brush and rocks, yelling, murderous, relentness. Seconds were vital, precious, and Dave had to think fast.

Back in the small covert where he had left Masters, Dave stared down at the man's prone figure. A plan flashed in his mind. There in the brush, while the vengeful riders came thrashing toward him, Dave stripped off Masters' Mexican clothes and donned them. The two men were of similar build, tall, broad-shouldered, lean-hipped.

With the fancy greaser sombrero on his head and the mask covering his face, Dave rolled Masters' inert body into a brush-grown fissure. He gathered up again all the weapons and darted away, running in cover until he reached the spot where he had first tackled the man.

He peered out cautiously. None of the riders was yet in sight. And there below him stood Masters' horse, a handsome bay. Dave leaped from the ledge of the cliff to the ground below, and ran to the animal. He stowed the three extra revolvers in the saddle-bags, then vaulted into the saddle.

Reining the horse around, he rode toward Masters' oncoming henchmen. As they broke into view Dave flung up his arm and, simulating Masters' imperious voice, he yelled:

"You fools! Yuh let that Callier hombre slip out on us! He's high-tailed on a horse he had hid out across the timber. He's making for our hideout this minute—to turn loose those three 2 Bar W prisoners!"

"We'll run him down, damn him!" snarled one of the men, sawing his horse about.

"No, yuh won't! Head for the hideout! We gotta beat him there."

"What about this here ranchhouse?"

"Damn the ranchhouse! Let it go for the time being. We can come back and take it. We got to stop Callier. That hombre's a Texas Ranger—he can get help and do us plenty damage. Head out!"

His ruse worked. The men milled about but a moment, then hit out through the chaparral. Once they were started, Dave let one of the others take the lead. He had no

more idea than a spook where the hideout was.

There were miles and miles of riding, riding fast in a tight body. Through timber and over obscure canyon-gutted trails. They forded a shallow creek, traveled over several miles of shale underfooting, and were still going when night came on.

In the moonless dark they skirted a butte—and then they were there. The hideout was just a long-abandoned line-camp shack, rankly grown about with thickety timber, with a tumbled-down corral at one side. Dave stopped the six outlaws at the corral.

"Stay here," he ordered, "and watch for that prowling Callier. I'll go in and see if everything is all right,"

HE took the saddlebags from the bay horse and walked, straight as a soldier marches, toward the shack with its dim lantern light.

"Who's that?" demanded the guard from shadows beside the front door.

"Masters," Dave answered. "It's all right."

"Okay, boss." Evidently the guard was accustomed to seeing his boss masked.

"Everything all right?" Dave asked.

"Fit as a fiddle, boss."

"All right. Go in ahead of me. I want to say something to these jaspers."

The guard opened the door, turning to enter. Dave was but a step behind him across the threshold. Beyond the man, in the dim-lit room he could make out the forms of three men, bound and hunched awkwardly against the walls.

Dave silently, grimly raised his gun and brought it down hard on the guard's head. The man pitched forward on his face, groaned and lay still.

Dave closed the door, whirled about to face the room again and yanked off his mask. He confronted the three bound 2 Bar W men who gaped at him in utter astonishment.

"I'm Dave Callier," he announced and swiftly set about cutting them free.

"Glory be!" cried Hank Peters, and Dave cautioned them to silence. The others gave vent to their thanks and relief in low tones.

"I got a plan," Dave said as he passed out guns from the saddlebags. "There's six men out there at the corral we got to take. What's this guard's name?"

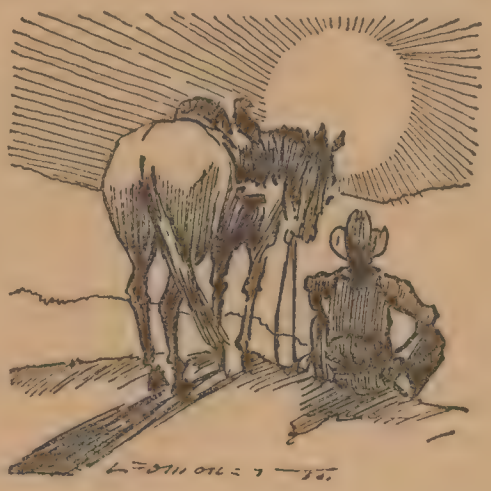
"They call him Reynosa," Hank answered.

"All right. Tie him up and dump him back there in the deep shadow."

A moment later Dave stepped to the door. He called out to the outlaws at the corral:

"All right, men, come on in! That Callier hombre has already been here—and Reynosa captured him!"

Approval sounded loudly from the waiting men and they came trooping to the cabin. Dave stepped back into shadow. The men filed past him,



unmasked now, hard-looking Border gunmen, none of them really Mexican. They pushed noisily into the cabin.

"Callier's over in the far corner—all roped up neat," Dave said, and stepped in behind them,

The outlaws were still trying to pierce the semi-dark of the corner where the guard's trussed body was huddled, when Dave Callier's voice lashed them like a bull-whip:

"All right, you cutthroats! Yore damned jig is up. If yuh don't believe it—look around yuh!"

The startled bandits whipped their gaze about the cabin. Their eyes bulged. From three sides they saw drawn guns menacing them. Saw Dave Callier's unmasked face.

"Yuh got yore choice. Get yore filthy hands up pronto—or go for yore guns and swallow lead!"

Not a man went for his gun. Six pairs of outlaw hands shot into the air, and the 2 Bar W men got busy disarming and tying up their prisoners.

Two hours later Dave Callier and the three 2 Bar W cowboys rode up to the Wings' ranchhouse with their prisoners. Dave found Betty and Cass Wing sitting guard over Hugh Masters, thoroughly tied up and dressed in parts of Dave's own clothing.

"I found him staggering about out yonder beyond the clearing—after the raiders had left," Betty said. "I took him in, made him secure. But—I've been so worried about you, Dave!"

"Shucks!" Dave said, a warm thrilling glow filling him inside. "I been having fun."

HUGH MASTERS was no longer arrogant and mocking. He was thoroughly cowed and beaten, and he quailed before Dave's own glance.

"Masters told us everything—before he realized what he was a-doin'," Cass Wing said. "He hired Chihuahua Joe and all these cutthroats. Wanted to drive me off my homestead. He was trying to spread his range on east—and he had to have my graze and water to do it."

"And now," Dave said, "I reckon you better send Hank up to La Cabeza to get word through to the Rangers. We need 'em down here to take over these coyotes."

"And then—you'll be going back to the Pecos?" Betty asked.

Dave could not help but catch the note of pleading in her voice. "Well," he said judiciously, "I don't know. With this range sorta cleaned up like it will be, I might wanta to take up some range myself—and move down. Only—"

"Only what, Dave?"

"Only I'm afraid every time I made a move yuh didn't understand, Betty, yuh might be accusing me of trying to steal yore cattle!"

"Oh, Dave!"

"But there's one way we might cure all that." Dave was smiling and moving toward her. "We might fix it up so that what's mine is yores and what's yores is mine. Then it wouldn't make no difference who stole what." His voice became husky, sincere. "What do yuh say, Betty?"

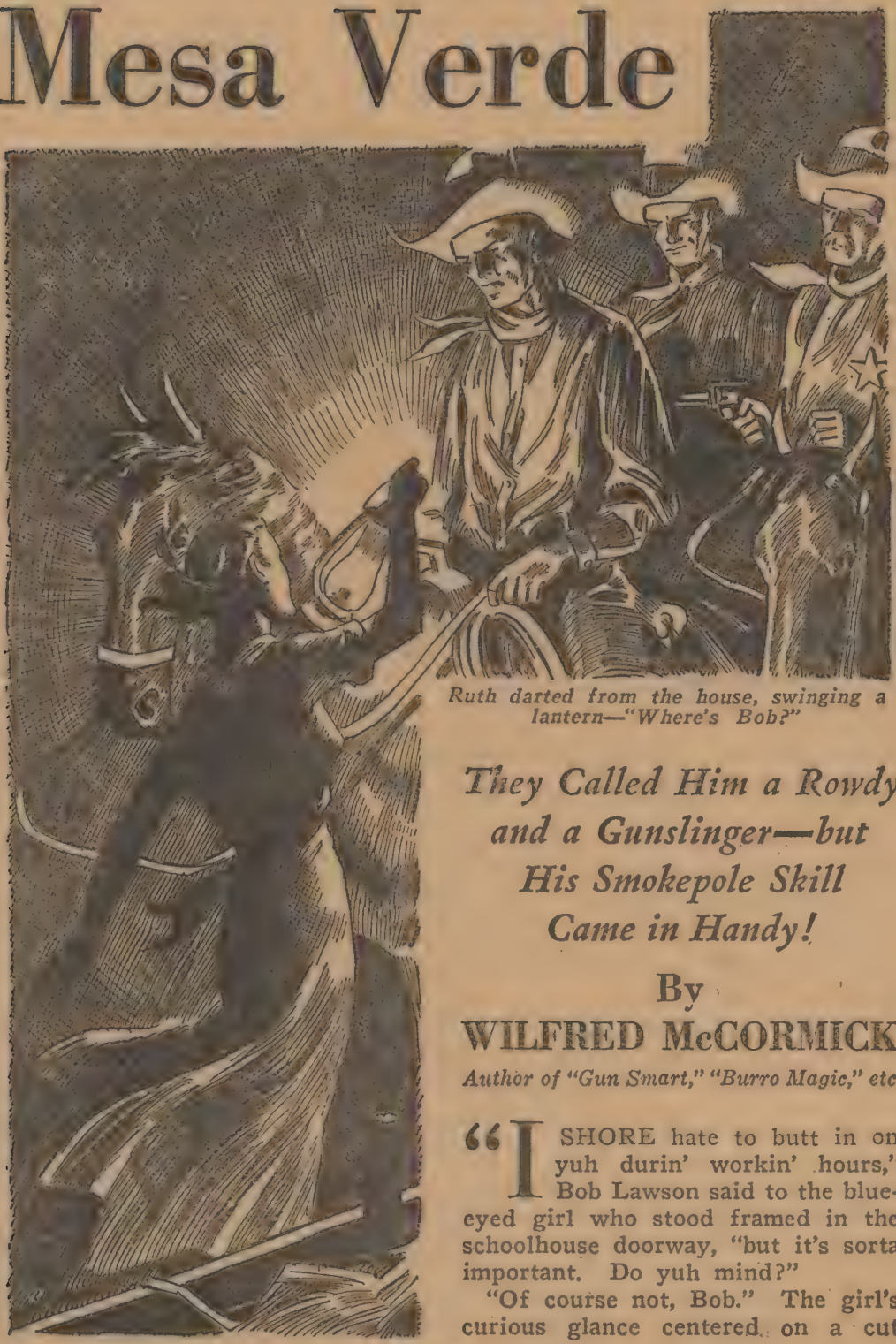
"Oh, *Dave!*" she said, and went into his arms.

They turned to find Cass Wing and the 2 Bar W cowboys looking on, laughing and loudly applauding.

"For the first time since I come here, Betty," Dave said, moving with her toward the door, "I believe it's safer for us on the outside—in the moonlight—than it is here in the house!"

In Next Month's Gala Fiction Roundup: THE GREY RIDER, *a Novelette of Prairie Justice by* ALAN M. EMLEY—*and Other Exciting Romantic Stories!*

The Coward *of* Mesa Verde



Ruth darted from the house, swinging a lantern—"Where's Bob?"

They Called Him a Rowdy and a Gunslinger—but His Smokepole Skill Came in Handy!

By
WILFRED McCORMICK
Author of "Gun Smart," "Burro Magic," etc.

"I SHORE hate to butt in on yuh durin' workin' hours," Bob Lawson said to the blue-eyed girl who stood framed in the schoolhouse doorway, "but it's sorta important. Do yuh mind?"

"Of course not, Bob." The girl's curious glance centered on a cut

place in his cheek. "Has something happened?" she asked uneasily.

Bob Lawson did not meet her gaze. He lowered his eyes, a noticeable flush creeping into his tanned, smoothly shaven features. With his hat, he pointed toward a near corner of the little one-room building.

"Mebbe we better step over there," he suggested. "These kids of yore'n are about to git stiff-necked already!"

The girl smiled slightly, and followed. Out of sight of the curious children, she paused to glance once more at the cowboy. Their eyes met for a brief instant. Then Bob Lawson lowered his.

"Ruth," he began, fumbling awkwardly with his hat, "I reckon yuh ain't forgot what we talked about last night, have yuh?"

"Of course not. But what's happened to you? You've been in some kind of trouble."

THE cowboy's grey eyes went suddenly cold. His youthful features hardened into the mature lines of a much older man. He looked up again at the girl, and this time his gaze did not falter.

"Ruth," he said, "I want yuh to forget all that I told yuh last night. All them promises, an'—"

She laid a hand on his arm. "And about becoming Mrs. Robert Lawson?" she asked him, in a low tone. "You're wanting me to forget that, too?"

He nodded without speaking.

Suddenly the girl laughed—a laugh that she had evidently intended to sound carefree, but which was a trifle high-pitched and obviously forced.

"Silly!" she cried. "Why, of course I'll forget it. In fact, I knew all the time that you weren't serious, and that we were just having a little good-natured fun. I supposed that you understood, too, because—"

"Listen, Ruth! It wasn't no joke with me. I never was half as serious in all my life. But somethin's made me change my mind for the time bein'—that is, it ain't changed, either! I wonder if yuh'd let me drop around this evenin' an' sorta explain things? Mebbe yuh'll understand better when I git through."

The girl's chin tilted.

"No. I have twenty-five complete sets of examination papers to grade."

"Then how 'bout tomorrow evenin'?"

"Sorry," she said, turning away, "but I shall probably have other plans."

Bob stared after the trim little figure as Ruth disappeared inside the building. For a moment, he was almost in the notion of following—of blurting the ugly truth, then and there—but he changed his mind.

A dozen rapid strides took him to where his rangy bay was ground-hitched, feeding lazily from the short grass along the schoolyard fence. He vaulted into the saddle. He wheeled the big bay, almost savagely, and dashed out the gate at a reckless run.

Bob headed straight for Mesa Verde, only a quarter mile away, where the double row of one-story buildings showed up plainly on either side of the dusty street. As he rode, his fingers pinched at the reins, and his lips clamped grimly together.

Reaching the outskirts of the little supply town, he slowed to a steady jog. He was nearly past the long shed that served as Mesa Verde's lone livery stable, when the bay suddenly snorted and shied off to one side.

Bob looked around.

A sleek, prancing sorrel trotted from the place, drawing a fancy, rubber-tired buggy with shiny yellow wheels. A single glance was suffi-

cient. Bob grunted scornfully and started ahead again.

A shrill whistle checked him. He turned in his saddle. The driver was motioning for him to ride closer. Reluctantly he obeyed.

Tim Hurley waited until Bob's horse had stopped with its nose near the dashboard. Then he slid his grey-checkered cap to the back of his head and leaned forward confidentially. He was a tall, gaunt fellow of about middle age, and his glossy, black hair was carefully plastered to an exact part in the middle. His hollow eyes, set rather closely together beside a long hooked nose, were restless, giving the man a hunted, furtive appearance.

Bob Lawson had never trusted Hurley. And yet the cowboy had no actual grounds for disliking the man—aside, perhaps, from the fact that Tim had been among the most persistent to pay court to Mesa Verde's attractive young school teacher. But for that matter, every single man in the community had also hoped for the young lady's ultimate "yes," with about the same degree of success—or failure.

It did seem, however, that Tim Hurley, owning the town's leading supply store as well as a fair-sized spread in the foothill country, was beginning to hold the inside track over his rivals. Right now, it did not take any explaining for Bob Lawson to realize exactly where Tim was heading in his new blue suit and sporty-looking rig.

"Lawson," the older man said, lowering his voice in a confidential tone, "I jest heard about yore trouble with Truck Medlin this morning. 'Course, I'm sorry. Truck's a bad man, and if I can be of any help to—"

"Much obliged, Mr. Hurley," the young cowboy cut in coldly, "but I can tend to my own affairs, I reckon."

The fellow's eyes seemed to narrow even closer together, but he maintained his composure. He laughed mirthlessly.

"All right," he said. "I jest thought I'd make the offer. If yuh wanted the man put under a peace bond, so the courts could compel him to leave yuh alone, I could mebbe use my influence to—"

Bob Lawson gathered his reins. He straightened in the saddle, biting his lips to hold himself in check.

"I'm grown!" he snapped between angrily gritted teeth. "Was that all yuh stopped for?"

"Why—yes. Er—that is—" Tim Hurley leaned back against the cushion. "Say, you jest rode past the schoolhouse. Did yuh happen to notice if the brats was dismissed yet?"

"Miss Garver's still busy," the youngster told him curtly.

Tim Hurley flushed, but said nothing. Giving the restless sorrel its head, he drove off rapidly without looking back.

LAWSON continued half a block further, dismounting at an empty hitch-rack in front of a small restaurant. He removed his high-crowned hat long enough to smooth his tousled hair, and stepped inside.

A burly, heavy-jowled fellow slouched toward him from the rear. Wiping his hands on a greasy apron, he paused abreast of the young waddy and leaned across the rough board counter. His big face warped itself into a broad grin.

"I lose five bucks," he said. "I jest bet Lem Wright that yuh wouldn't show back in town for a month."

Bob ignored the implication. "Where's Truck Medlin?" he demanded.

The big fellow laughed, shaking his head. He pointed a grimy forefinger at Bob.

"You didn't talk that way this mornin'," he surmised. "Yuh was

plumb scared to death. What yuh been doin'—loadin' up on red-eye, or has that stuck-up schoolma'am talked yuh into—"

Bob took a quick step forward. His left hand flashed through the air. The open palm caught the big man a smacking blow on the cheek. The fellow let out a curse, staggering back.

"There's plenty more where that come from," Bob growled angrily, doubling his fists. "All you've got to do, is make another crack about Miss Garver."

The two men glared at one another for a brief instant. Then the big fellow suddenly made a dive for a shelf, just beneath the counter. He was slow.

BEFORE his fingers could even touch the butt of a huge .45 that rested there, Bob Lawson's own weapon had cleared leather. Bob jabbed it roughly in the fellow's waist.

"Lift your hands!" he ordered. "Now ease over to your left. That's it!"

"You can't get by with this!" sputtered the other indignantly. "I'll git Sheriff Dee Jones and—" Another rough jab of Bob's gun silenced him.

"I asked yuh a question," Bob said coldly, "an' this time, yuh're gonna answer. Where's Truck Medlin?"

The big fellow glanced down helplessly. Slowly he shook his head. "I don't know," he mumbled. "Last I seen of Truck, he was a-headin' toward the Silver Eagle Saloon."

"On foot, or horseback?"

"Ridin' that little mouse-colored dun with the blaze-face an' one white foot."

"Much obliged!"

Bob Lawson withdrew his gun. Holstering the weapon, he backed out of the restaurant and strolled along the street. He stopped in front of the Silver Eagle. A number of horses were hitched there, heads drooping lazily, but none of them was the mount the big fellow had just described. Bob decided to have a look inside anyhow.

Winks and sly grins greeted his appearance but nobody nodded a greeting. The young cowboy well knew the reason for the men's cool treatment, but he said nothing.

Truck Medlin was not there. Bob left the place immediately. He stopped at four other buildings with the same fruitless result.

As he hesitated near Tim Hurley's supply store, debating whether or not to enter, a voice hailed him from across the street. A tall, gangling man with a wide, greying mustache strode toward him. A metal badge gleamed from the man's left suspender.

"Howdy, Sheriff!" Bob greeted him.

"I want to see yuh a minute, Lawson," the officer said. He laid a hand on Bob's husky shoulder. "It's about that trouble with Truck Medlin. I sent Truck on home, awhile ago. You're next."

"That fracas wasn't none of my fault," protested Bob, half angrily. "Truck Medlin picked the quarrel hisself, an' I never even struck a blow."

"So the boys tell me. They say he backed yuh all over the place. But yuh're huntin' for him now—with a gun!"

"Truck's got a gun of his own, I reckon. He'll get an even break—"

"That don't make no difference," the sheriff interrupted sternly. "I told yuh to hike out for home. There ain't goin' to be no trouble here in Mesa Verde, and you young bucks had just as well learn it now as any time. Go on! Git started."

"I've got a little business yet to—"

"Never mind the stallin'! Yore business ain't that important. Go

on home, till yuh git cooled off some. If yuh don't, I'll take yore gun away and lock yuh up. Savvy? I mean every word of it, too."

Bob Lawson, looking the rangy old officer straight in the eye, saw that there was no use to attempt any protest.

He forced a tired grin, nodding slowly. "I'll go," he agreed, "but yuh'd ought to know Truck an' me will be gittin' together, some of these days. That's certain as home-made sin. All them insults an' abuse he showered down on me—"

The sheriff's low laugh interrupted.

"From what I hear," the officer said, "yuh didn't git so riled about 'em this mornin'. Now, after Truck's already left town, you come bellerin' up and down the streets like a mad bull in fly time!" The sheriff's laugh held a touch of scorn.

Bob Lawson's six feet of healthy cowboy brawn tensed stiffly. On the verge of loosing a scathing comeback, he managed to control himself. He spun on his heel abruptly. A few steps farther on, he turned.

"There's got to be a showdown sometime!" he snapped. "You'll see!"

"Go on home and cool off," the officer repeated.

The young cowboy strode rapidly to his bay, and forked his saddle. He jogged back along the narrow street. Curious, grinning men watched him go, but he kept his gaze straight ahead.

It was nearly ten miles, due west of Mesa Verde, to Bob Lawson's little HK Bar outfit, and he rode into the boarded corrals shortly after sundown that evening.

The HK Bar, though not a large ranch, was becoming one of the prosperous places of the region, due solely to Bob Lawson's careful management and hard, ceaseless work. Bordering the edge of Burnt Spring River, a swiftly flowing stream from the mountain slopes higher up, his stock and grass had always had plenty of good, clear water. The ranchhouse, half hidden in a cluster of cottonwoods, was a neat three-room affair that he had built with his own hands.

Aside from an outlying note for five hundred dollars at the Mesa Verde Bank, Bob Lawson was on the way toward being quite comfortably fixed. The fall cattle shipments, he figured, would net him a tidy sum in addition to paying off the note; leaving, as he liked to imagine, just one thing between him and an ideal future.

THAT future was Ruth Garver. If he could persuade the pretty young school teacher to share the HK Bar with him, Bob felt that his dreams would have all come true.

He had given up a lot in the past few months for Ruth—sacrificed certain things that had caused him hours of burning humiliation. And the result: very little progress, so far as he was able to tell.

Sometime after twelve that night, Bob awakened and turned over in his bed. He was about to go back to sleep when his half-awakened senses caught the sounds of galloping hoofs. He listened intently. The horses seemed to be coming closer. He sat up in bed, yawning sleepily and rubbing his eyes.

Only minutes later, he heard boot heels stomping along the walk, toward the house. Bob climbed out of bed. He had just reached for his pants that were draped across a nearby chair, when a heavy knock rattled the door.

"Comin' pronto!" he called. "Who is it?"

"Open up!" a familiar voice answered. "It's me—Jones—and some of the boys from town. We want to talk to you."

For some unknown reason Bob

Lawson's heart suddenly pounded faster.

"Somethin' gone wrong, Sheriff?" he called uneasily.

"Yeah! Open the door."

Bob padded across the room in his bare feet. He slid back the bolt. Turning, he struck a match and lit a small kerosene lamp.

Sheriff Dee Jones walked inside. Other men followed, almost filling the room. The men were sober faced and unsmiling.

"Git on your clothes," the officer ordered Bob bluntly. "Yuh're under arrest."

"Under arrest! What for?"

"Murder."

Bob Lawson forced a laugh. He glanced from one man to another. They were grim-lipped and silent. He looked again at the sheriff.

"I don't understand," he muttered. "Who do you folks claim I murdered?"

THE officer eyed him keenly. His shoulders shrugged. Leaning his body against the table, he crossed his arms.

"In case yuh mean to claim yuh don't know," he said, "I'll tell yuh. You shot Truck Medlin in the back. That is,"—the sheriff corrected himself hastily—"accordin' to the evidence in this case, it looks like yuh shot him in the back, about nine-thirty tonight."

"Where's this supposed to happened?"

"At Truck's own place. He'd gone outside to turn on the windmill, when yore—when a rifle shot caught him from behind. He managed to stagger back inside the house and died on the kitchen floor."

"Did he say anything? Accuse me, or anybody?"

"Partly. Leastways, he repeated some more of that stuff he branded yuh with this mornin'."

"What stuff?"

The sheriff scowled impatiently. "Aw, you know," he growled. "That yarn yuh've been spreadin' about his being a ex-convict and not fitten to live around decent folks."

Hot blood rushed through Bob Lawson's veins. His big fists opened and shut convulsively. He took a step toward the sheriff, his chin thrust forward.

"There's somethin' I want to tell yuh," he growled angrily. "I wanted to tell Truck this mornin', but he wasn't in no mood to listen. It's about—"

The sheriff held up a hand. "Since I don't happen to be the jedge," he interrupted, "yuh'd jest as well save yore breath. Yuh'll git a fair trial."

"But I didn't kill Truck Medlin!" the young waddy declared hotly.

"Git on your clothes."

Once more Bob glanced around the half circle of scowling faces. He saw that anything he might say would be useless. Without another word, he sat down on the edge of his bed and pulled on his boots. His shirt and leather jacket came next. Then he turned to the sheriff.

"Who signed that warrant, or complaint, or whatever yuh call it?"

"Why, Tim Hurley."

Bob laughed scornfully. "I see," he said. "A nice little frame-up, ain't it? Why don't yuh ask Tim a few questions hisself?"

A small, elderly man, who walked stiffly erect stepped from the group. Bob knew him. Old Dan Phillips. The man planted himself squarely in front of the bewildered cowboy.

"Yuh can't go throwin' no blame on Tim Hurley," he snarled. "Tim was at my place all evenin'."

"Shore of that?"

"'Course I am. Miss Ruth Garver stays to our house. She had Tim over for supper this evenin', an' afterwards me an' the old lady left 'em alone in the parlor. We heard 'em stirrin' around some, from time

to time, an' it was jest ten-thirty-five when I poked my head out the bedroom window an' seen him drive off for town." The old fellow paused. "Reckon I better tell him the rest, Dee?" he asked, looking inquiringly at the sheriff.

The officer nodded. "Jest as well. Ever'body's got to find it out sometime, anyhow."

"Tomorrow mornin'," old Dan said firmly, again facing Bob Lawson, "Tim Hurley an' Miss Ruth are leavin' for Texas on a weddin' trip. Tim slipped word to me tonight hisself, all about—"

"I don't believe it!" Bob interrupted hotly, "I won't—till I hear it from Ruth her ownself."

The sheriff caught him by the arm. "Let's git started," he commanded gruffly.

The group tramped noisily outside. Going into the corral, two of the men roped and saddled Bob's long-legged bay. Mounting, they started for Mesa Verde. Bob and the sheriff headed the procession, with the rest of the posse trailing behind.

Bob Lawson had little to say. A leaden weight seemed to hang from his shoulders as he jogged steadily along beside the grim-faced sheriff.

Although he knew that his own outlook, with the mass of dangerous evidence against him, was bad, Bob was more concerned over what old Dan had just told him about Ruth's approaching marriage to Tim Hurley. He cursed himself helplessly for his conversation with the girl that afternoon, holding little doubt that his rash words had influenced her to accept Hurley, a man he hated now more savagely than before.

But there was nothing he could do about it — not for the present, at least. So he rode along thoughtfully, in grim silence.

The moon settled slowly behind the crest of El Capitan in the west, and heavy clouds began forming overhead to make the night dark as pitch. The ponies kept a steady pace along the trail however, and carried them rapidly toward town.

Nearing the outskirts, old Dan Phillips spurred up beside the lead pair.

"If yuh don't mind, Dee," he said to the sheriff, "I'll drop off at home. It's sorta late for an old coot that's—"

"All right, Dan. But we'll need yuh at the prelim'nary hearin' tomorrow mornin'. It's set for ten o'clock."

"Shore. I'll be there."

"The posse started ahead. Suddenly a door flew open. A shadowy figure darted from the house, swinging a lantern. As the flickering light came closer, Sheriff Dee Jones puckered his lips in a low whistle of amazement.

"Miss Ruth!" he exclaimed. "What are yuh—"

"Where's Bob?" she interrupted breathlessly.

"Right here," Bob answered. "What is it, Ruth?"

"Are you hurt?" She swung the lantern above her head. "Oh! I've been dreadfully worried."

THE cowboy forced a hollow laugh. He leaned down in his saddle, cupping his mouth with one hand.

"I jest heard the news. I shore hope Tim makes you happy, little girl, because—"

"Never mind me," she interrupted hastily. "It's you that happens to be in trouble. I was afraid you might resist—do something terrible, or—" She choked. "Did you have to shoot that poor fellow?" she asked pleadingly.

"I didn't shoot him," Bob growled, half angrily. "This whole thing is a rotten frame-up."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. I tell yuh that I didn't have a thing in the world to do with it! Not a thing!"

The girl turned quickly to the sheriff.

"Mr. Jones," she said, "would you let me speak to Bob for just a minute—all alone—just us two?"

The sheriff hesitated. He scratched his head. "Yuh see, Miss Ruth," he began uneasily, "the charge is murder, and we can't take no chances of—"

"But Bob didn't do it! He's just said so himself!"

The sheriff laughed grimly. "They all say that, Miss Ruth. And besides, Lawson don't happen to be his own jury."

BOB LAWSON reached out to lay one hand on the officer's arm.

"Ruth's got somethin' to tell me," he said, his tones low. "Mebbe it's important. Mebbe it'll help solve this whole thing. Will yuh give us jest a minute?"

"She can come down to the jail in the mornin'."

"Why not take us to old Dan's house?" the young cowboy suggested eagerly. "There ain't but one door, an' two windows. You can watch 'em all. Ain't that safe enough?"

"All right," the officer agreed finally, after exchanging a few muffled words with one of his deputies. "Go ahead. But don't forgit we've got our eyes open."

Bob Lawson did not answer. He had already swung down from the saddle and was following the girl toward the house. She opened the door. They stepped inside, closing it carefully behind them.

Ruth Garver placed her lantern on the floor. She turned to glance up into Bob's face, with something glistening in her eyes that looked suspiciously like tears.

"Tim—Mr. Hurley told me about your trouble this morning," she began, a catch in her voice. "Said the whole town was laughing at you for being a coward. But I know better, Bob. I know you were just keeping your word to me—just remembering what I'd always nagged you about—being a rowdy, and a gunfighter, and all that sort of thing. You were just trying your level best to be my kind of a man—the sort a girl would want for a husband, and—"

"No use talkin' like this now," the cowboy cut in wearily. "It's too late, if Tim Hurley's gonna lead you to the preacher in the mornin'."

The girl flushed. "Never mind me," she said, "and never mind Mr. Hurley. It's you who needs help—you who are in trouble. If there's just something that I might do—no matter how much—something!"

"Mebbe there is!" Bob suddenly grabbed the girl by both shoulders. "Listen, Ruth!" He said that almost savagely. "I've got to know somethin' for shore. Was Tim Hurley inside this room every minute of the time between sundown an' ten-thirty-five tonight?"

The girl pulled herself loose. Her eyes snapped like tiny balls of fire.

"Of course not!" she declared indignantly. "Whatever put such a mess as that in your head?"

"Why, old Dan Phillips claims—"

"No matter what Mr. Phillips says," the girl interrupted sharply. "I'm telling you the straight of this thing. Tim—Mr. Hurley left right after supper. That's the last I saw of him. And if you want to know something else" — her voice rose higher—"I asked him not to call on me again. *Now* are you satisfied?"

"Then yuh was all by yoreself this evenin'?"

A knock on the door panel interrupted. Bob and the girl turned.

"Come on, Lawson!" the sheriff called impatiently. "It's gitting late."

Bob leaned closer to the girl. "Don't worry," he whispered. "Their murder charge is blowed sky-high!"

He opened the door and went outside. The sheriff moved over, grip-

ping him by the sleeve. Bob held back. He was grinning.

"Wait a minute!' he urged. "We've jest busted Tim Hurley's alibi. He wasn't here last night, like old Dan thought he was."

"How do yuh know? Kin yuh prove that?"

"Ruth jest told me. Said Tim wasn't—"

Knowing laughs broke from the posse. One of the men stepped nearer the sheriff.

"The girl would try to protect this jasper," he said. "That's why they wanted to git all alone together—so's they could hatch up a yarn that might hold water."

Bob Lawson whirled on the fellow angrily. "You mean," he demanded, "that Ruth is tellin' a lie?"

The deputy stepped back out of chance reach, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Women are strange critturs," he observed. "They'll do a lot to save a man's neck."

Bob glared at him hotly. Then he made a sudden lunge forward. The deputy backed away. A pair of powerful arms clamped on Bob from behind. Other men stepped in his path. They held him, struggling but helpless.

The sheriff elbowed his way through them. He grabbed hold of Bob's shirt front.

"Yuh're goin' to jail," he said, "whether you like it or not! Yuh'll git a fair trial. Come on!"

"Yeah!" Bob retorted bitterly. "An' in the meantime Tim Hurley gits a chance to sneak plumb outa the country."

The men paid no attention. They hustled him along the narrow path to the horses. Strong hands boosted him into his saddle. The sheriff caught his bridle reins. He moved off, leading the bay. The rest of the group followed.

Bob did not offer any more resistance, but his mind was working rapidly. As the posse turned out of Main Street toward the jail, he slid quietly behind the saddle. Watching his chance, he dropped to the ground. Horses shied in the inky darkness.

"Hey!"

"What's the matter?"

THE men jerked their startled mounts into line, riding to the hitch-rack. They had not missed him!

Bob sprinted along the nearby alley as fast as his legs would carry him. He would have only an instant, he knew, until the group discovered his ruse.

He raced to the front entrance of the Stockman's Hotel. Crossing the broad porch in one lengthy stride, he rushed into the hallway. Toward the rear, a horizontal strip of light was coming from beneath a door.

Bob leaped for it. Grabbing the knob, he nearly yanked the door from its hinges. He bolted inside the room—and stopped in his tracks.

Tim Hurley stood facing him, a heavy .45 leveled dead at him.

"Turn around," Tim ordered in a voice of deadly calm. "Then shut the door and raise your hands."

Bob Lawson stared helplessly at the cocked weapon. It was held steadily. And the gloating, merciless look of a killer was in Tim Hurley's close-set eyes.

Slowly he closed the door. Tim laughed.

"Yuh're dumber than I thought," he said sneeringly.

The young cowboy faced him. About eight feet apart, the pair glared at one another savagely.

"Yore game didn't work," Bob said, after a tense pause. "Mebbe I ain't so dumb after all. Want me to tell yuh about it?"

"Go on!" snapped the other. "But keep yore paws hoisted. It makes listening easier."

"The main idea," Bob said, his words a guttural growl, "is that yuh wanted Ruth Garver—ain't it?"

Tim shrugged. "Right, so far," he admitted.

"Well, Ruth didn't see things quite yore way. She'd begun to let me hang around—enough that it was worryin' yuh. So yore coyote mind went to work. First thing yuh done was to shut off Truck Medlin's credit at the store. Made up a lie about how I'd warned yuh against him on account of his servin' a stretch in the pen. You were smooth, too—smooth enough that he didn't even get sore at *you*. 'Stead, he comes gunnin' after me. Yore idee was for me to kill Truck, or for Truck to kill me. It didn't matter which. In either case, yuh stood almost a cinch of winnin' the girl—some day." Bob smiled grimly and shook his head. "But it didn't work. Neither one of us died. And Ruth gave yuh the gate. So yuh grabbed at the last chance by doin' the murder yoreself."

"LET me finish," Hurley snarled. "I'll tell yuh the rest, jest like I'll be explainin' it to the sheriff in about three more minutes, or whenever he comes."

"Go ahead! I'm listenin'."

"There ain't much," Hurley said coldly. "I'll jest explain I was settin' here on my bed when you rushed in and attacked me with a chair. Shore I had to defend myself. This gun'll do the job. Yuh understand?"

"Plain murder, huh," Bob gritted. "But they'll call it self-defense."

"Uh-huh!" sneered the other. "Are yuh ready?"

Bob saw the merciless eyes narrow to slits. The gun came up. Bob stiffened. The gun reached a line with his chest.

Suddenly Bob let out a bellow. He lunged frantically to the side. The gun crashed deafeningly. Bob felt hot lead tear through his left shoulder. It staggered him. He reeled toward a dresser in the corner. His groping fingers found a heavy clothes brush.

As Tim Hurley circled for a finishing shot, Bob hurled the brush at a lamp across the room. His aim was good. The room was in instant darkness.

Tim Hurley cursed furiously. Streaks of flame spurted from his six-gun as he fired shot after shot into the corner.

But none found their mark. Even as he had hurled the clothes brush, Bob Lawson had dropped to the floor and scrambled toward the bed.

He waited tensely. Then Tim Hurley's gun clicked on an empty cylinder.

It was the chance for which the young cowboy had been hoping. He lunged across the room. His outstretched arms clutched Tim Hurley around the ankles. He jerked suddenly. Tim lost his balance and fell. Bob crawled on top of him. He pounded the man's head viciously on the floor.

A roaring clatter of heavy boot-heels sounded in the hallway. A lantern swung high above them. Excited hands pulled Bob loose from his groggy opponent.

"Hold on to him, men!" Sheriff Jones yelled above the confusion. He helped Tim Hurley to his feet. "Are yuh hurt, hombre?" he asked.

Tim was scowling blackly, both hands pressed to his battered, bloody face.

"Took yuh a hell of a long time to git here," he growled savagely. "That yeller coward accused me of murder, and—"

"Yeah—I know, Tim. But he can't make it stick."

A shrill, high-pitched voice echoed from outside the door. The men turned.

"Let me in! Let me in!"

The group parted. Ruth Garver elbowed her way through their midst. She paused breathlessly, facing the sheriff.

"Tim—Mr. Hurley was not at my house tonight!" she cried breathlessly. "I can prove it! He was only there long enough to get a picture he'd—"

Tim Hurley laughed. A hollow, mirthless chuckle.

"Miss Garver is mistaken," he said. "She and I were there together all evening. We played checkers. I won seven games to her none, and—"

The girl did not wait for him to finish. She thrust a bundle of folded papers in the hands of the surprised sheriff.

"Look at those, Mr. Sheriff!" she invited.

"What are they?"

"Examination papers. Twenty-five complete sets. I graded them all tonight. See? My own handwriting! Now figure it out for yourself. How could a person play seven games of checkers, besides doing all this—Stop him!"

Tim Hurley had made a sudden dive for the window. Somebody else, though, had noted the move, even before the girl.

For the second time that evening, Bob Lawson's arms closed about Tim Hurley's ankles.

He hauled the storekeeper back inside the room.

A hand gripped him by the shoulder. He looked up into the lean features of Sheriff Dee Jones. The sheriff, he noted, was smiling.

"We'll take care of Tim from now on," the officer said quietly, "and I reckon yuh're free to do as yuh please. Mebbe yuh kin find somebody else to wrap them arms around!"

Bob Lawson released his hold. He turned to see the girl standing with her eyes lowered to the floor. Crimson showed on her cheeks. He stepped over beside her, caught her hands inside his own.

"Let's git away from these goggle-eyed jaspers," he suggested.

Ruth Garver raised her eyes. "Anywhere you say," she whispered.

"Good! To the preacher's, first thing in the mornin', an' then out home—our home. How about it?"

"Anywhere you say!" she repeated softly.

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FIT GEM AND EVER-READY RAZORS

Sinister Guest

"Stay there!" he snarled. "Don't let a squawk out or I'll knock yuh cold!"

Chan Cooper Steered Clear of Gals Until the Plucky Schoolma'm Came Ridin' Out of the Night With an Armful of Trouble!

By CLINTON DANGERFIELD

Author of "The Threat," "Senor Wyoming," etc.

"WHO built this fire?" snarled Bateman, his horse looming up in the moonlight and sliding to a stop. He glared at his fellow longriders squatting around the blaze.

Grip Dodgett looked up from the bacon he was frying.

"I built it!" he retorted. "My authority's as good as yore'n, Bateman, an' I ain't aimin' to live on hardtack forever."

"The drive ain't more'n well started, an' you know damn well that even cigarette sparks kin draw trouble."

"Ef it comes to trouble," sneered Grip Dodgett, rising with the frying

pan in his hand, for the crisp bacon had finished cooking, "ef it comes to that, Bateman, yuh've busted one of yore own orders high, wide an' handsome."

"Meanin'?"

"Yuh was the first one to say we had to lay off women till these Splithoof Seven cattle was over the border an' sold. Yet there's yore woman peepin' outa the bushes!" He pointed.

BATEMAN whirled his horse around, jerking out his gun.

The girl whom Grip Dodgett had glimpsed stepped out from behind her chaparral screen. She was booted and spurred, her riding togs smart. She came forward eagerly.

"I'm *not* with this gentleman!" she exclaimed, waving a hand toward Bateman. "I was riding over to the Trace-chain Ranch. I'm the new teacher, Sara Smith, and this is Saturday—no school. I stopped to drink at a little spring—a bear blundered out, scared my pony while I was lying by the spring, and he galloped off." She shivered. "The bear nearly scared me to death too."

The outlaws into whose circle the horse's fright had thrown her, glanced in perplexity at each other. Except for Bateman, who stared straight at the girl. His scarred, savage features lighted with greedy admiration for her beauty. He said arrogantly:

"You kin hit the trail with us. There's extra hosses. One's saddled."

"That wouldn't suit me, thanks," she said pleasantly, glancing with interest at the bedded-down herd in the background. "All I need is the horse you speak of. I'll either buy it outright from you," she added, producing a fat purse, "or I'll keep it until you come back."

Grip Dodgett, still holding the frying pan, fixed earnest eyes on the purse. He was about to speak when the frying pan left his hand and returned to the fire, spilling hot grease and carefully fried bacon over the coals. There was a hole in the pan—made by a rifle bullet.

Half a dozen rifles now snarled from the slopes above the camping place. The bewildered young teacher saw the cattle lurch up. The mounted herd-wranglers—there were two—whirled their horses and disappeared into the night, leaving the cattle to their own devices.

The men at the cooking fire scattered. Horses reared and snorted. Some jerked free. The girl saw Bateman crumple and pitch from his horse. She caught the animal before it could run away, and dashed for the chaparral, leading it. These honest cattlemen, she thought, had been cruelly ambushed by outlaws, from whom she must escape. Hidden there in the thicket, she could wait developments. She didn't dare to ride away, for fear of running directly into some of the ambushing party.

The men who had fired at the long-riders, whom she supposed to be innocent, now galloped down on the camp. As they came, the cattle bolted, stampeded by the firing. They went blundering down the valley, snorting, bellowing. The girl could hear the clashing of their horns as they ran.

As the attacking horsemen dashed past her chaparral screen she saw their fierce, hard faces in the moonlight, and shuddered. They had scarcely a glance for the dead men their shots had left lying on the ground.

Both herd and pursuers thundered away like a whirlwind. In a surprisingly short time, only the faint crackle of the little fire broke the stillness. Those who had been gathered about it now lay sprawled on the ground. Of the horses, none was left except the one Sara had seized. The others had been swept

along with those who pursued the cattle.

Horrified, she said to herself that of those men she had seen tending the cattle and harmlessly cooking their supper, the two who had galloped into the darkness—the mounted herd-wranglers—might be the only men left alive. But she must examine those crumpled inert figures and make sure none needed help.

Still leading the horse and gathering her courage for the ghastly sight, she came back into the open and studied briefly the five men stretched on the earth.

Four of them bore the marks of death so plainly that she wasted no time on them, but went to the fifth —Bateman, who had fallen from his horse—expecting to find him dead.

To her surprise he groaned faintly, then sat up, blinking in the moonlight, with blood streaming down one temple where a bullet had creased him, knocking him from the saddle.

"Are you badly hurt?" she asked.

"THAT damn campfire!" muttered Bateman.

"Yes, yes, I know—it drew those ambushers—cruel men. And now they've ridden off after your cattle —they'll steal every one!"

Bateman stared at her. In a flash he saw how she had misunderstood the situation. His darkly devious mind instantly set about pondering how he could make use of her.

His life was now in grave danger. The whole section was evidently alarmed—he might at any moment be pounced on and strung up. He groaned loudly.

"I'm badly hurt," he said. "Hit here—" He touched his chest.

"Oh, let me look at it! Perhaps I can stop the blood."

He staggered to his feet and put a hand on her shoulder.

"I'm hurt inside—there ain't no bleedin' to speak of, 'cept for this cut on my head. But yuh got to find some place where yuh can hide me."

"Why should you need to hide?"

"Yuh don't know those longriders! I've been warned they were threatenin' my life. They've sworn to hunt me down like a dog. Yuh've got to save me!"

"Where shall I take you?"

"Anywhere," he groaned, "that yuh think is plumb safe. I'm sufferin' so I can't think." He looked at her shrewdly under lowered lids.

"There's a prospector near here," she said thoughtfully. "Riding, I passed his half-hidden house a week ago. I think he'll take you in, dress your wounds, and drive away any of those villains that try to attack you."

"Then take me to this old feller," groaned Bateman. "The more hid his house is, the better. I ain't in no state to fight no longriders now."

"He isn't an *old* feller," she corrected, frowning a little. "He's young and very fierce-looking. They say his stepmother cheated him out of his ranch and he was jilted by some girl, so he's living by himself."

"Well, don't palaver here no longer! Yuh kin ride in front—I'll set behind and steady myself by holdin' onto the cantle."

The horse, a big blue roan, had been ridden hard and didn't buck, even though he greatly disliked a double burden.

The girl and her protege moved steadily forward in the moonlight. Bateman's mind was on two things. She had pulled out a fat purse—how much did it have in it? Did she have any jewelry concealed on her anywhere?

He rasped out: "What's this here prospector's name?"

"I hear it's Channing Cooper. How do you feel now?"

"Worse! Ever' breath I draw is like a knife in me!"

Bateman's sinister mind pondered the situation. This young prospector, would he be armed? Best thing to do would be drill him, soon as the right moment came. Then there'd be the girl, her purse, any jewelry she had, this Cooper's portable property—and a good time till he, Bateman, was ready to move on.

Before they reached his half-hidden house, Chan Cooper was busy lighting his campfire in the rude chimney place.

When his supper was over, he sat in front of the fire, smoking moodily and recalling the recent past. His stepmother had cheated him. The moment she had stripped him of his property through a trick, his fiancée, having no desire to marry a poor man, had promptly jilted him. Her love for him had been mere desire for comfort, plenty, a good bank account—under those circumstances any man would do!

He was well rid of her, yet giving her up had been deeply bitter, a blow alike to his love and his pride. Women! Well, no girl would ever make trouble for him again—he was done with them.

He remembered a certain lovely girl he had seen at the station some days ago. She had asked him to pick up her dropped quirt. He had done so. She thanked him. He answered coldly that she was welcome. But when she tried to say something about the beauty of the day, he had answered her with a chill stare and no other reply. Yes, he had been voluntarily rude.

She'd never speak to him again—and so much the better! She was too pretty for any man's peace. He felt that he hated her for her beauty, because it stayed in his memory.

To hell with women! He turned to caress his dog, a big cougar hound with large melancholy eyes and a very abstracted expression, yet a dog that missed nothing.

"We like it here, Big 'Un, don't we? The old-timer who sold it to us built a mighty good little house. Must have been spooky about folks—settin' those iron bars in the windows and puttin' padlocks on the doors outside!"

The dog nuzzled a cold nose into his master's hand. In the little stable outside, Chan's only horse whinnied in loneliness. A coyote keened in the chaparral, and the cougar hound pressed close to Chan's side. His master rubbed his head.

"Yuh're glad we had enough dinero to buy this an' get our bearings—eh, Big 'Un? They call us prospectors! So we are. Prospectors for peace and quiet!"

SUDDENLY the dog barked, and moved toward the door.

"Cougar comin', old feller? Well, I'll let yuh out and we'll see what yuh find!" He opened the door.

The dog shot out into the night; his master followed. But Big 'Un didn't take to a trail. He stood there, barking loudly, and through the noise that he made, Chan Cooper heard the approach of a horse.

"Some cowboy who's got out of his way," he thought.

But when that horse broke into view from the wooded trail and stopped before Chan Cooper's hut, there stood before Chan a big blue roan, a girl in the saddle and an evidently wounded man clinging to the cantle, reeling a little where he sat.

Chan recognized the girl. This was the one whose quirt he had picked up. She said rapidly:

"I'm sorry to intrude on you, but I've got a wounded man here, desperately wounded. He needs care—help him down."

Her sweet, imperious tones, her perfect certainty that he could not do otherwise, affected Cooper. But he spoke curtly.

"Where'd yuh get him? What've yuh brought me, an outlaw?"

"No, a cattleman. He was ambushed, his cattle were driven off. Oh, don't stand there staring that way! Help him down!"

Here Bateman aided her by a deep groan.

Driven by his own generous impulses, Chan Cooper strode forward and half lifted the big outlaw from the horse's hind quarters. He had never seen the man before, but Bateman's harsh, forbidding face didn't create any confidence in his host.

HELPING him into the hut, he put Bateman in a chair. The longrider moaned, lay back and shut his eyes.

"Where are yuh wounded?" demanded Chan Cooper sharply, for here in the lamplight he liked Bateman's face still less.

"Let me — lie down," faltered Bateman. "Cain't sit up no more."

Without speaking, Cooper helped him across to a cot. There the outlaw stretched full length and groaned again. Chan examined the only wound he could see, that on the man's head, and shrugged.

"Nothin' but a scalp wound! Reckon yuh've got a headache, but that's all."

"I'm hurt inside," the outlaw said faintly. "Don't touch it jest yet."

Secretly his eyes were searching his host. To his disgust he saw that Chan wore a laced-down gun.

"Glad to see yuh're armed. Damn rustlers ever'where!"

"Wouldn't be wearin' it, but I've been practisin' my draw on a new holster," Chan said almost absently.

His thoughts were on this unexpected couple in his sanctuary. He didn't trust the wounded man. But this girl—there was so fine an air of candor about her, and such evident confidence in Chan's kindness, that she was, he thought, like a radiance in the room.

His gaze and hers met again. She smiled at him.

"What'll I do with the horse?"

"That mean yuh're gonna stay here tonight an' look after this tough specimen yuh've brought in?"

"Why—of course," she said, flushing.

Cooper gave her a searching look. "I'll put yore horse up. Be back in a few minutes."

He went out the door, the hound at his heels.

He had scarcely got out of sight when the outlaw sprang to his feet, seized the girl and jammed her down into a crudely built armchair.

"Stay there!" he snarled, his eyes a sinister flame. "Don't let a squawk out or I'll knock yuh cold! I'm aimin' to drill that guy jest as soon as he looms up in the doorway there. That'll give me a chance for a sure shot."

"No!" she gasped, white-lipped.

"I want this house fer you an' me —nobody'll know we're here."

"You—you—" she began in sudden realization. "You're a rustler! Those were stolen cattle! Stolen by you!"

He had moved to a strategic position commanding the door, but now he took a step toward her, a brutal oath on his lips, his gun ready—as he had threatened—to club her into silence.

She leaped toward the table, blew out the lamp and darted toward the door.

To fire after her would be to alarm the man at the barn; so the outlaw sprang after her, tripped over a chair, and went down with a crash.

She sped like a deer for the barn and bolted into it, running to the light of a lantern she saw swinging in Chan's hand. She ran almost into his arms, gasping out her warning in half-choked words of explanation.

"I thought there was somethin'

phony about him!" Chan Cooper answered. "But don't worry. Stay here till I 'tend to him. I'll leave the lantern with yuh, but if yuh hear trouble comin' out this way, blow it out an' crawl up into that little hay loft."

Before she could speak, he was gone. She crouched there, shivering, listening as his footsteps died away. Above her in the eaves a barn owl moved and made uncanny noises. Chan's horse snorted, the sound made her jump.

HER tense attention awaited the loud crackle of gunfire, but presently Chan Cooper returned quietly to her. To the girl's surprise, he was grimly amused.

"Your pleasant friend," he said, "has decided not to come out. He knows yuh warned me, so he bolted my door inside and, of course, has locked the back door too."

"And wh-what will you do?" she faltered.

"I've set Big 'Un—my cougar hound—to take care of the back, and I'll watch the front. He won't come out of there at once. As a matter of fact, I don't think he'll come out before daylight. And I've no desire to burn him out—I value the house."

"I brought a murderer into your home," she said miserably. "Oh, how could I have been such an idiot?"

She was crying. He wished she wouldn't.

"When yuh ran out here to me, was he threatening yuh?"

"He said that I should stay there with him, but that he meant to murder you just as soon as you came in that door."

"Then yuh didn't come out here altogether for yore own sake? It would have been safer for yuh to play along with him. Didn't he try to get you when you ran?"

"Yes, but I'd blown out the lamp," she explained, "and in the dark, when he was chasing after me, he tripped over something and fell. Oh, isn't there anything I can do to make amends for my idiotic trust in that man?" Sobs broke her voice.

"Two things you can do."

"Oh—tell me!"

"First, stop cryin'."

"I—oh—" She conquered herself and smiled at him, "That's done!"

"Thanks. Next, soon as I kin saddle yore horse, yuh're to ride away—*pronto*. Then yuh'll be safe."

"Ride away? After I've brought this danger on you? I may not amount to much, but I might come in handy some way. I've got a pistol," she added proudly, pulling a small derringer from her coat pocket.

He laughed. "Yuh must have inherited that from yore grandmother."

"I did, but it's a good gun. And I'm going to stay right here! Don't try to make me run away. I won't." She added wistfully, "You don't think much of women, do you?"

"The two cruelest people in my life," he answered slowly, "have been women."

"And you judge us *all* by those two!" she retorted with spirit. "That's not fair!"

"I'm beginnin' to see that it isn't."

They fell silent. As they sat together in the quiet barn, he felt the sweetly disturbing influence of her presence. *She* wouldn't desert him! So different from May, to whom he'd been engaged. May had abandoned him the moment trouble came. But this girl, this lovely stranger, was ready to fight for him.

He hadn't the heart to tell her how much she hampered him in his plans to get the outlaw. When dawn came, she *must* go. Out of harm's way.

His thoughts were interrupted by the hound. For Big 'Un suddenly broke into a deep-mouthed baying. The dog's bell-like tones were momently decreasing in volume—obvi-

ously he had hit the trail and was getting farther away from the house he was supposed to guard.

Chan Cooper sprang up.

"You should be miles from here," he reproached. "But now—don't move till I come back. And put out that lantern."

He raced into the night.

Into what danger was he going now? In the distance, the terrified girl heard the lowing of a strayed steer, a lonely, lost call for the herd. Behind the barn a dogfox snarled. The sound, guttural, strange, rang in her ears like a warning of death.

She rose swiftly, then she heard footsteps coming toward the barn, and presently, from the alleyway, came a reassuring voice.

"It's Chan Cooper. A cougar passed close to the hound—it was more than Big 'Un could stand. He's trailin' it. I took a look at the windows and padlocked doors—that feller's in a regular jail. And he's got all the breaks in there. He'll wait for me to make some fool move, like goin' in on him."

"Was he burning the lamp in there?"

"No. There wasn't even any smoke out of the chimney."

"The night is so still," she said thoughtfully, as they dropped down again on the grain sacks, "that you could hear any noise he made in drilling or sawing, couldn't you?"

"Yes, I could. You know, I think yuh're quite a soldier."

"If only I could be some help to you," she said gratefully. "You've been so kind." Then, remembering all she had heard about what his stepmother and that other girl had done to him, she suddenly slipped a small warm hand into one of his.

"Won't you be friends?" she asked in a low, sweet voice.

That little hand of hers seemed to glow with her magnetism and youth. The fragrance of her hair floated to him in the night, and suddenly he knew that he wanted, not only to be friends with her, but more than friends. She had come to him on the wings of disaster, but she herself—why, this girl was one in a million!

"Sure, we'll be friends—always," he said.

She drew her hand away now, and he felt an almost overwhelming impulse to put an arm around her, draw her close. Yet something in him still fought, though feebly now, against her pervading charm.

"Mind if I smoke?"

"I'd love it," she answered, and he lighted a cigarette. As the pleasant smoke curled around them, she said:

"When you struck that match, I looked at my watch. It can't be more than an hour now before light. What will we do then?"

"Why, then," he answered grimly, "I'll—"

HIS sentence broke off as the wind of a bullet fanned his cheek.

He sprang up and aside, pushing the girl down as he rose.

"Flat!" he ordered sharply. "Lie there."

She obeyed, but she snatched her derringer from her pocket and hoped that she might yet be of use.

Suddenly she saw, or thought she saw, the swarthy, looming form of Bateman in the dim barn alley, where only faint moonlight filtered in. The tall figure was little more than a shadow, but without hesitation she raised herself and fired at it.

Bateman's heavy .45 answered the flash of her gun.

Then a third shot roared and the outlaw uttered a choking yell. His own gunfire had illumined the spot where he stood, giving Chan a target.

As the explosions echoed through the little barn with the snorting and plunging of the horses, the longrider ran blindly forward. Chan fired again, and heard him fall.

Chan stood listening, but now nothing stirred.

Then past him the little barn owl flew, almost brushing his cheek. It went out into the moonlight, its round yellow eyes able to see where men could not.

Chan Cooper lighted the barn lantern. If the outlaw were shamming, the light would bring death on Cooper. But he must see what had happened to his girl companion.

The flame of the lantern showed him a dead man stretched on the barn floor. The girl lay on her side, the smoking derringer still in her hand. She neither moved nor spoke.

He set down the lantern, sprang to her side, knelt by her, and lifted her in its radiance.

"Yuh hurt? Darlin', cain't yuh speak to me?"

She didn't answer. Where his hand touched her shoulder, it came away sticky and warm.

"His damn bullet plugged her!" groaned Cooper. Cradling her in his arms, he strode for the house.

Of her second entrance into Chan Cooper's hut, of her lying on his cot, of his hurried departure at daybreak for help, Sara Smith knew nothing.

For many days she wandered in a strange country of wild dreams. In those dreams, danger was forever threatening her, so that her heartbeats mounted and sometimes cold sweat stood on her forehead. But always, at the end, there came help—Chan Cooper's tall figure looming suddenly on the scene and driving away the menace.

So that when at last she opened her eyes and saw him standing beside her, it only seemed a continuation of those dreams. "Stay with me—will you? I've been so frightened!"

"Always," he answered, dropping on his knees beside the cot. "It's good to hear you speak again."

But now her eyes were puzzled. She was trying to separate reality and dream. Then memory cleared.

"That man! What became of him? He may come back!"

Chan shook his head, smiling. "He'll never trouble yuh again."

"What became of him?"

"I killed him. Yuh gave me the chance when yuh shot at him, so reckless. He fired in return at yore gun-flame and told me just where he was by the red streak from his muzzle."

"Oh—but how did he get out?"

CHAN laughed then. "The chimney throat's bigger than I knew. He came out that way. The dog was gone. He made no noise—and figgered on a surprise attack. The sheriff says he was a wanted man—Red Bateman. There's a big reward comin' from the law—to you."

"No, please, to you. I only want to forget him!"

"Then I'll put it into cattle," he smiled. "But besides that, I've got a little money left from the wreck of my affairs. With that, I'll begin again. And beginnin'," he added "would be paradise if yuh'd share it with me!'

"We've been together," she said softly, "in reality and in my dreams—we couldn't afford to lose each other."

The motherly rancher's wife whom Chan Cooper had brought with the doctor, and who had remained with Sara, now came in at the door of the hut.

But at the picture she saw before her, she smiled—a wise, understanding smile, turned away, and went back into the open again.

A Complete Novelette of Fighting Hearts

Glory of

Several riders emerged from the

CHAPTER I

A Hard Loser

DAN RUTLEDGE knew that this was the showdown between himself and old Emery Buchanan, owner of the big Cross Arrow spread. He faced it as he did all things—calmly, courageously.

"I figgered you'd be blowin' up one of these days," he told the older man, both of them standing in front of the Cross Arrow ranchhouse. "Of course, I'm sorry. That is, on account of Glory."

"Glory!" ranted the fuming old cattleman. "You mean Glory's share of this outfit!"

"Then," Dan said slowly, "that's the only reason you offered me such a good price for my little horse ranch over at Fawn Springs just to get rid of me."

"You can think what you want!" snapped the irate Buchanan. "But yuh'd better take my offer and move on. Yuh'll find other pretty girls.

Six-gun Conflict Awaits Dan and Glory

the Range

By CLIFF WALTERS

Author of "Punchers in Peril," "Against Odds," etc.

cedars, and with drawn guns began closing in

And Glory'll soon forget about yuh."

"You're wrong, Dad!"

Both men turned to see Emery Buchanan's younger daughter poking her auburn head from the window of her room. Dan couldn't help smiling at the angry defiance flashing in her eyes.

"Git back in there!" her father ordered. "I'm talking to—"

"You're threatening him!" Glory declared. "I heard you!"

"It's all right, little copper-top," Dan drawled gently. "I'll see yuh tomorrow mebbe. Now take it easy."

"All right, Dan."

Emery Buchanan's florid face turned even redder.

"So yuh've got her listenin' more to you than she does to me, eh? I'll stop that, all right! Will yuh take two thousand fer that undersized layout of yours, and move on?"

Dan shook his dark head.

"Nope. But I'll leave yuh now and let you cool off a little, Emery. So long."

He turned away and started to-

When Lobos Range the Cross Arrow Spread!

ward the nearby grove of cottonwoods where he left his horse. Suddenly Buchanan ceased yelling after him, interrupted by the approach of a buckboard rolling into the dooryard. Turning, Dan recognized the pair on the buckboard seat as Kate Buchanan, Glory's elder sister, and "Stormy" Grore, one of the Cross Arrow's new punchers.

"What does this mean, Grore?" Buchanan shouted. "I thought yuh was told to ride—"

"Just a moment, Dad!" Kate Buchanan, a tall, slim girl, somewhat plainer looking than her younger sister, raised a protesting hand. "Stormy and I have been—married."

"Married!"

If old Buchanan had been angry at Dan, he now seemed beside himself with rage. He faced the dark, burly Stormy Grore, and deliberately called him a doublecrossing range tramp who had married his daughter for the sole purpose of "horning in" on the Cross Arrow wealth.

Dan, still lingering, saw that Grore was taking the thing good-naturedly. In fact, there seemed to be a gloating expression on his dark face.

"Well," he said at last, "what are yuh goin' to do about it, Buchanan?"

"I kin fire yuh off this place!" the cowman thundered.

"All right." Grore motioned his bride to climb back into the buckboard. "We'll send your team back after we git located."

"No!" A hoarseness had come into Emery Buchanan's voice. "Don't take Kate away. You kin live in the old house there till I can build a new one fer yuh."

"Thanks, Dad!" Kate cried, throwing her arms around his neck. "I knew you'd forgive me."

Dan shrugged as he walked to his horse. He could understand Emery Buchanan's dislike of Stormy Grore. The latter, a blustering person, might appeal to Kate because of his looks. But Grore wasn't a man's man. There was something in his manner, a restlessness in his dark eyes, a furtiveness, that had always aroused a feeling of suspicion in Dan Rutledge.

LEAVING the Buchanan place, he rode west until he struck the ford on Antelope Creek where, only recently, had been erected the cheap buildings and corrals of the Mallabreen Road Ranch. As he started past the main building he was hailed by Chris Mallabreen, the owner.

"Hey, Rutledge! How about buyin' a few head of horses from you—on credit?"

Dan shook his head.

"No, Mallabreen. I can't figure how you could make a go of this layout here. There ain't an awful lot of travel through the Swale."

The squat, blond Mallabreen smiled.

"Maybe travel'll be pickin' up considerable one of these days, cowboy. When it does, I'll be needin' fresh horses to trade for trail-weary plugs belongin' to the customers. If yuh're smart, yuh'll let me have a few head."

"Nope, I'm sorry."

The other's opaque eyes hardened.

"Politely tellin' me yuh don't trust me, eh?"

"I haven't got any faith in yore road ranch profits," Dan replied. "I don't see how—"

"Bein' a dumb horse wrangler, you wouldn't! Still, maybe you ain't so dumb. Chasin' after Glory Buchanan!"

"Who told you all the gossip?" Dan drawled.

"Stormy Grore," the other retorted laconically.

"He ought to know. He's in the family now."

"*What?*" Mallabreen's droop-lidded eyes opened suddenly. "You tellin' me he's married that—"

"S'pose yuh ask him," Dan replied.

"He's evidently a very close friend of yore'n."

"He ain't neither!" Malabreen denied quickly. "Never laid eyes on him till I moved into the Swale here. But you ain't sore, are you, because Grore'll be inheritin' as much of the Cross Arrow spread as you will—even if that girl *would* marry you?"

"Mind your own business!" Dan snapped.

"Sure a swell-lookin' gal, Glory is!" the squat man taunted. "I think I'll make a play fer her myself. Shore would like to have her come over and tend bar fer me. With anybody as trim-built as she is, dishin' out drinks to my—"

He didn't finish. For Dan leaped out of his saddle. His right fist lashed out, catching Chris Mallabreen flush on the point of the jaw. The latter grunted, staggered back and sat down abruptly.

"You asked fer it!" Dan growled.

"And you're askin' fer somethin', too!" Mallabreen snarled, shaking his dazed head. "If I had my gun I'd—"

"Go get it. I've got time to wait."

But Mallabreen made no effort to rise. With a contemptuous grunt, Dan swung back into his saddle and started upstream. Yet he looked back as he rode; kept looking back until he rounded the bend of the stream. He had read murderous hatred in Mallabreen's dull eyes. And drilling a man between the shoulder blades with a rifle bullet was not above Chris Mallabreen.

Dan had intended to ride north along Antelope Creek until he reached "Flagpole" Pierce's little cattle ranch. But now, thinking of Kate Buchanan's marriage, he changed his mind. He had started to swing due west when a voice called:

"Hey, Dan!"

He turned and saw Pierce, riding toward him.

"What happened back there?" Flagpole nodded toward the road ranch down at the ford. "I was jest toppin' a knoll when I seen yuh hop off'n yore horse and pop Mallabreen."

Dan eplained what had happened. Then he asked:

"Where were yuh headin' fer, cowboy?"

Flagpole flushed.

"Well, I was goin' over to make a call on Kate."

DAN evaded those keen blue eyes focused on him. He knew too well that Flagpole Pierce had loved Kate Buchanan for years.

"Why so glum?" his friend inquired.

"I—I didn't mean to be," Dan faltered. "But—well, there's somethin' you ought to know, Flagpole. Kate's married Stormy Grore this very mornin'."

There was silence for a little while. Then, swallowing hard, Flagpole said:

"Well, that saves me ridin' clear over to Blue Creek, Dan. Gosh! Stormy Grore must be a fast worker. He's done in a few weeks what I've tried to do fer years. But if Kate fell in love with him—well, I guess that's all there is to it. We don't know but that he might be worth a dozen like me."

"No, but I can't help guessin'," replied the loyal Dan. "Anyway, keep your chin up, cowboy!"

"That little sorrel you're breakin' fer me," Flagpole said, desperately trying to change the subject—"guess I'll go over to Fawn Springs with you and get him."

"Swell," said Dan. "We'll put on the feed bag, too."

The two horses jogged along; and although Dan did his best to make Flagpole forget what had occurred this morning, he felt that his efforts were futile. The sorrel horse which

his friend had mentioned was, Dan knew, to have been a gift to Kate.

They were within a mile of Dan's place when, dipping into a deep gulch, they saw the carcass of a yearling steer. Both hind quarters had been cut off; the rest of the meat had been left there for the coyotes.

"One of my steers!" growled Flagpole. "Now, who the—" He scratched his sandy-colored head perplexedly.

Turning in his saddle, Dan looked back toward the Mallabreen road ranch. He didn't mention it to Flagpole, but he remembered seeing a quarter of fresh beef hanging to a cottonwood down there by the ford.

"Looks like I'll have to keep a sharper eye on my steers," Flagpole was saying. "Doggone the two-legged wolf that done that! I'm about as lucky today as the magpie that tried raidin' the eagle's nest!"

"It hasn't been such a swell day for me either," his companion said.

"Or for Chris Mallabreen." Flagpole grinned broadly. "But I'd watch that hombre if I was you, Dan. I'll bet my watch agin a last year's cow track that he's a hard loser."

"He'll stand watchin', all right," the other replied, with a significant glance at the steer's carcass.

CHAPTER II

Gone!

THE following day Dan again rode across Antelope Creek, this time to keep a tryst with Glory Buchanan, whom he met at Cedar Butte, a convenient rendezvous of which old Emery Buchanan knew nothing about. As he swept the auburn-haired girl into his arms, Dan said:

"I've been thinkin' things over, copper-top. Now that yore dad's ordered me to keep away from the ranch, we've got to do all our meetin' out here. But it don' seem right, our havin' to sneak around this way. Why don' we put a stop to it? Marry me, an' let's move over to Fawn Springs."

"Not now," she answered softly.

"Oh, I know it ain't much of a place. There's no big house like yuh're used to. No cook to get yore meals. But still—"

"Don't say that, Dan," she interrupted. "I'd live in a tent with you. But I've got to think of poor old Dad. He's terribly upset about Kate and Stormy. I can't add to his misery just now."

"Well, I guess yuh're right," Dan agreed reluctantly. "But he's wrong thinkin' I'm tryin' to marry into the money. All I want is—you!"

"Oh, I've told him that a dozen times," she said wearily. "But it doesn't do any good. By the way, does Flagpole know about—"

"Yes. I had to tell him."

"Poor Flagpole! I—I wish I liked Smoky Grore as much as I like Flagpole. You don't like him either, do you?"

"Nope, I don't," Dan said flatly.

"But—we mustn't let Kate know how we feel. If she loves him, that's all that counts."

"I wonder if she really does," Dan muttered. "Oh, well!"

Just then a rider appeared on a distant ridge, and Glory said tersely: "That looks like Dad! I—I'd better be going, Dan! I'll see you later!"

She swung into the saddle and rode away. Dan lingered at the edge of the cedar fringe until the girl and her father disappeared from sight. Then he touched the spurs to his horse.

"Hold on a minute, Rutledge!" a sharp voice hailed him.

He turned and saw Smoky Grore emerging from a dense clump of the bushy trees.

"I couldn't help overhearin' a little of your powwow with Glory," Grore said evenly. "And I know what's gripin' yuh. I'm old Emery's son-in-law now. And I'll be runnin' the shebang purty darn soon."

"That so? I thought young Bobby Buchanan, Glory's brother, was doin' purty well fer a lad."

"Bobby!" Grore snorted contemptuously. "Why, that little polecat. I reckon I'll put *him* in his place quick enough. But it's jest too bad about you and Flagpole Pierce—you two were all set on marryin' the two Buchanan girls and takin' over the Cross Arrow, eh? It's a swell line you handed Glory about movin' over to Fawn Springs. Tryin' to make her believe that it ain't her money yuh're after."

"It ain't," Dan replied. "But yuh wouldn't understand that part of it, Grore. Yuh're not built that way."

The other flushed.

"I won't quarrel with you, Rutledge! Listen! Old man Buchanan's been tryin' to buy your dinky spread over at Fawn Springs. I told him I thought I could put through the deal for h i m—for a thousand dollars." His black eyes gleamed. "I've got the cash right here in my pocket."

"Then keep it there," Dan replied evenly. "My place ain't for sale at any price. What made you think *you* could put the deal through?"

"I've got a way of handlin' men, of gittin' what I go after. Take my advice, Rutledge. Sell!"

"I get what yuh're drivin' at, Grore," Dan said coldly. "But I don't scare very easy. Yore friend, Chris Mallabreen, tried that yesterday, and didn't have much luck."

"My—f r i e n d?" Grore's e y e s blinked. "Did he tell yuh he was a friend o' mine?"

"I guessed it."

"Guessin' out loud is dangerous sometimes," Grore drawled.

As he spoke, he edged his horse closer to Dan's. Now, having the advantage of a higher position on the sidehill, he made a bulldogger's leap from his saddle, his brawny arms reaching for Dan.

BUT the ruse was no surprise to Dan. He spurred his nimble black forward with a bound, avoided the flying hulk lunging at him. Grore rocketed for ten feet downhill before he crashed against a huge boulder. Dan, on the ground now, was grimly ready for him, his fists clenched. But the bigger man was too dazed by the fall to do anything more than mumble curses.

With a contemptuous shrug, Dan turned, mounted and rode away.

Yet the clash between himself and Grore wasn't closed as yet. Glory galloped up to his cabin that night.

"Dan!" she gasped. "I've come to warn you!"

"Warn me?" he echoed.

"Yes. Stormy Grore came back to the ranch with a big lump on his head. Told us you'd ambushed him—after he'd tried to buy your place—and had robbed him of fifteen hundred dollars. Money that belonged to Dad!"

"Why, that lyin' coyote!" Dan burst out.

And he told her what had actually occurred at Cedar Butte.

"But Kate believes his story," Glory said tersely. "So does Dad. He's going to have you arrested."

"He will, eh?" Dan gritted. "Well, first I'll get Stormy Grore. He's cached that money away somewhere. I'll choke the truth outa him if I have to rope him around the neck and drag him clear acrost this Swale!"

"And doing that," the girl said unhappily, "you'll hurt poor Kate. We quarreled tonight, the first serious quarrel we've ever had. And all because I said that Stormy was lying about your robbing him. My brother

Bobby sided in with me. We nearly had a free-for-all at the Cross Arrow. But I *had* to warn you that Dad's sending men after you."

"All right, I'll keep my eyes open," Dan told her grimly. "And now you'd better hit for home, lady. I think I'll saddle up and jog over to Flagpole's place. Then there won't be any surprise parties sprung on me while I'm asleep."

THIS he did, riding moodily on across the silent hills to Antelope Creek. It was the cracking of distant guns that roused him from his bitter thoughts. Curious, he spurred across a sage-splotched flat and up the slant of a low ridge. He was rounding the point of a jutting promontory when he saw a tall, lanky figure limping toward a saddled horse.

"Hey, Flagpole!" he called.

The other turned and waited until Dan approached him. He was cursing softly.

"Thought I'd finally ketched that two-legged wolf that was butcherin' my steers," he explained angrily. "But he seen me comin'. And then my grey there plants both front feet in a prairie dog hole. Darn! I sure rooted an awful furrow with my nose! But I'll ketch that range butcher yet, if I have to hang a red lantern over every prairie dog hole."

"I've got a hunch you should keep an eye on that new road ranch outfit, Flagpole," Dan said quietly.

"I've had the same hunch," the other answered. "Say, what are you prowlin' around this time of night fer, cowboy?"

Dan explained the circumstances.

"Huh!" grunted Flagpole when he had finished. "So *that's* the kind of gent Kate married! Well, at least I'm gittin' some company outa this mess. Jest between us two, I've been feelin' lower'n a post hole."

The next day Dan scouted warily back home. But apparently Glory and her brother Bobby had succeeded in persuading old Emery Buchanan that Dan hadn't stolen his money. At least, there were no unwelcome visitors awaiting him at his cabin.

Later, however, while rounding up a bunch of saddle horses in the pasture below the spring, Dan sighted a visitor coming. The latter obviously was neither one of the Cross Arrow riders, nor an official from Twin Rock. Slight of build, rather flashily dressed, the blond-headed stranger hailed Dan. He stated flatly that he had heard that Dan had horses for sale, and that he was in the market to buy some.

"Well," Dan replied hesitantly. "I was just roundin' up about ten head to haze over to the Padlock outfit in Big Bend Basin. They usually buy about ten head of broke stuff from me every summer."

"Quite a long hike, isn't it?" the stranger asked.

"Yeah. But they happen to like the way I break hosses. And they pay good prices."

"I could pay a good price, too," the soft spoken stranger countered. He pointed northward to the Green Slope Mountains. "There's a gold rush on by Portal Pass up there. I think I kin pay yuh a fair price, and still make a good profit on what horses I kin trail over there."

"Well—" Dan hesitated. "Who told you to come over here, Mr.—"

"Shardelle is the name. It was a friend of yours who sent me to Fawn Springs. A young lady over at the Cross Arrow outfit, Miss Glory Buchanan. I stopped there last night."

"Oh, Glory!" Dan smiled. "And there's a gold boom on at Portal Pass, eh? First time I've ever heard of anybody strikin' gold in the Green Slopes. But I'm glad to hear it. Er—what do yuh figger yuh could

pay fer them ten head of horses there, Mr. Shardelle?"

"Oh, how about fifty dollars a head?"

"Well—"

"Sixty then. And that's about the best I kin do."

"Fair enough," said Dan.

"All right, it's a deal. Here's a pencil and paper to write out the bill o' sale. And here's the cash." He began counting it out.

TEN minutes later, Shardelle hazed the ten head of horses across the hills toward the Green Slopes. And the owner of the Fawn Springs place was exulting:

"Doggone! It ain't *all* bad luck. That's more money than the Padlock would've paid me. And I saved that long trip. Thanks to Glory!"

He then and there decided to ride over to the Cross Arrow, and tell Glory about it. Besides, he wanted to know definitely what was going on there. And it might be a good idea to keep an eye on the range around Cedar Butte, the spot where he and Stormy Grore had clashed yesterday.

Nearing the place, he experienced more elation. Glory, her auburn hair shining in the morning sunlight, was waiting for him. He spurred up toward her, and then reined in sharply, staring at several riders emerging from the cedars—riders who, with drawn guns, now began closing in on him. An angry flush surged under his tanned cheeks. For an instant he was tempted to whip out his own gun. But he controlled that impulse. Among the riders of the Cross Arrow were old Emery Buchanan, Bobby Buchanan—and Stormy Grore!

Dan looked at Glory.

"So it's a trap," he said coldly. "And you baited it."

"Don't be a fool, Dan," she answered. "Stormy here still swears you stole that money after you knocked him out. Dad thinks maybe you did. *I* know you didn't. That's why, rather than have them try to take you at your cabin where somebody might be shot, I've helped them do this."

The group of riders approached Dan.

"All right," Stormy Grore boomed, "start searchin' him, somebody. And if he's packin' a bunch of twenty dollar bills—"

"I *am* packin' some twenty dollar bills!" Dan gritted. "Thirty of them. Here they are." He reached into his pocket. "Yuh don't have to search me."

"Dan!" Glory cried.

Dan threw her a reassuring glance, then turned to Grore.

"This ain't the money you flashed on me yesterday, you lyin' skunk!" he gritted. "I just sold ten head of horses." Again he glanced to the frightened girl. "You know that, Glory! That stranger—Shardelle—you sent over to Fawn Springs?"

She stared at him.

"Why, I haven't seen any stranger. Never heard of—Shardelle. And I won't lie—even for you!"

She hurled the last words at him vehemently. Then she buried her face in her hands. For a moment Dan Rutledge's world seemed to topple. Not that he feared those sinister guns around him. It was the look Glory had given him, that terrible accusation in her eyes.

"I said I jest sold ten head of horses," he declared savagely. "I kin prove it if you'll be fair enough to give me a chance. Come with me, any or all of you. We kin overtake—"

"Yuh sold those horses you had in the pasture?" asked young Bobby Buchanan.

"Yes. We'll ride by there. I'll show yuh they're gone. Then we'll catch up with the man who's hazing

them now over toward the Green Slopes."

"All right," Bobby answered. He turned to his scowling father. "It won't take long, Dad. And he's entitled to a fair shake."

"We'll all go along!" snapped the elder Buchanan. "I ain't goin' to chance him gittin' away from yuh."

Closely guarded by riders on either side of him, they topped the low ridge overlooking the pasture at Fawn Springs. It was Dan who first reined in his horse.

"Well?" Bobby Buchanan drawled. "There's the same bunch of horses I saw in that pasture the last time I rode by here, Dan. Are they the ones you sold?"

"Yes," Dan muttered, scarcely able to believe his own eyes. "Them's the same horses I sold. They've been run back into the pasture. And the fellow who bought them's gone!"

"I get it!" Stormy Grore laughed contemptuously. "The stranger bought 'em, paid you cash for 'em, then just gave 'em back—for fear they might get homesick!"

And then old Emery roared:

"Take him to Twin Rock, boys! No man can steal my money and get away with it!"

CHAPTER III

The Gambler

DAN looked back along the ridge. He wanted to talk to Glory. But she, too, had seen. And now, her auburn head drooping lower than ever, she was riding back toward home. It looked as if Stormy Grore—and the suave Shardelle—had won. Bitterly, and with all the odds against him, Dan was led away toward town, two Cross Arrow punchers riding on either side of him.

As they passed the road ranch at the ford on Antelope Creek, Dan saw Chris Mallabreen leaning in the open doorway of his main building. The latter said nothing; only threw back his head and laughed raucously. Dan looked away, morosely regarding the several teams and pack outfits which, probably, en route to the gold rush at Portal Pass, were stopping at Mallabreen's place.

Or was there any gold rush? He turned to Bert Wilson, one of his escorts, and asked:

"You know anything about a gold rush at Portal Pass?"

"There's a lot of talk about one," the other replied. "Lot of folks trailin' over from the Willow River country—all these yuh see passin' through The Swale here."

"Yeah," Dan nodded. "Mallabreen told me that the road ranch business would pick up. Funny how he knew. Mebbe he's the one that started these gold—" His voice trailed off.

"Well, he's cleanin' up plenty, gold or no gold," Wilson answered. "Me and Tom there was down at his place last night. An' you should've seen the money them gold-crazy loons was tossin' away over the poker table to that gambler of Mallabreen's. And the prices he was gittin' fer drinks!"

"Gambler?" Dan inquired in an offhand manner.

"Yeah. Some slim hombre with hands like a woman's. They call him Deck, and he sure can handle a deck of cards!"

"Purty flashy dresser, is he?"

"Yeah."

"Uh-huh," said Dan.

He had a strong hunch that Mallabreen's gambler was the same Shardelle who had bought his horses. The more he pondered the thing, the more convinced he became that Mallabreen, Stormy Grore and Deck Shardelle had framed him. But how could a man locked in jail prove

anything? The whole thing looked pretty hopeless.

The next two days seemed like an eternity to Dan. He learned to hate the log walls and barred windows of the little jail in Twin Rock. At night he stood at the small window, his strong hands clenched, his grey eyes staring out across the hills between town and The Swale. If only Glory would come to see him! Or Flagpole!

On the third night he was lying sleepless on his bunk when he heard a key turning in the heavy lock on the door. Wondering why old Jim Ames, the jail tender, would be entering at this late hour, he sat up. Then a tall, lank figure slipped inside.

"Flagpole!" Dan gulped.

"NO noise, cowboy," Flagpole said. "I poked a willer through Jim Ames' window—and lifted his pants off'n the bed post. Get dressed—"

"I'm ready," Dan whispered. "Yuh got horses—"

"Shore! Right below this hoosegow. Come on!"

Stealthily, Dan followed Flagpole out of the building. They ran across the open ground between the edge of town and the willow-fringed creek. Here two horses awaited them. And from the saddle-horn of the one which Flagpole had brought for Dan hung a cartridge-belt and a .45.

"Buckle it on later," Flagpole suggested. "Let's put distance between us and here. I'm feelin' nervous as a colt in a canyon full of mountain lions."

They mounted, kept to the protection of the willows until they were beyond hearing distance from the sleeping town. Then Flagpole, taking the lead, swerved into the mouth of a draw, quickened the pace.

"I'm shore grateful, cowboy!" said Dan, as they swung up the side of the draw. "But how come you decided to 'bail' me out? I was beginnin' to think—"

"There's the reason!"

They had now gained the top of the draw's left bank. As Flagpole spoke, he checked his horse and pointed back toward Twin Rock. Dan turned in the saddle—to find himself staring at flames licking the darkness some quarter of a mile below.

"Good gosh!" he blurted. "Ain't that the jail?"

"It's the jail, all right," Flagpole gritted. "I didn't get yuh outa that firetrap none too soon. Them dried-out logs helped along with some coal oil."

"You *knew* the jail was goin' to be burned?" Dan interrupted, his breath coming fast.

"Yes. I've been doin' some prowlin' around Chris Mallabreen's road ranch. Sniffin' around for a smell of fresh beef to see if it didn't have my brand on it once. Well, it did, all right. But that ain't all I found out." He paused.

"Go on," Dan prompted quietly.

"Well, I overheard a little conversation between Stormy Grore, Mallabreen and Deck Shardelle. They was plannin' to visit town tonight. Burn the jail and settle your hash fer good. Seems like they don't like the idee of your marryin' into the Buchanan outfit."

"The dirty coyotes!"

"They had another reason, too," Flagpole went on. "They're makin' use of the bill of sale yuh gave Deck Shardelle on them horses, and have already rounded 'em up. Thirty head or more. They aim to peddle 'em at high prices to the gold rushers. Yeah—gold rushers! It's all a fake, though. Mallabreen come up here first to get his swindle-shack fixed up fer the suckers, leavin' Shardelle to start the rumor on the back trail."

"The ornery skunks!" Dan's hand

dropped to the butt of the .45. "But gosh, Flagpole, s'pose yuh hadn't been able to swipe them jail keys?"

The other chuckled.

"Then I'd had to tell him what was brewin'; get the drop on him and make him let you out. But it's better this way. Grore and his pals will think yuh're a heap of ashes the way that jail's goin' up in smoke."

"Does Glory know?" Dan asked slowly. "Even if she does think I stole her dad's money, she won't like the idea of me burnin' alive."

"She don't think you stole her dad's money," Flagpole chuckled again. "Not after I talked to her this evenin'. Besides, she knows I was goin' to deliver you from the clutches of the law 'fore the jail was burned."

"Then she knows that Grore—"

"I reckon she guessed it by now—though Grore still claims you robbed him of old Buchanan's money. But what do we do now?"

Dan rubbed the stubble of beard on his chin. His face was hard and set. "Well, here's how I savvy this. As soon as they fired the jail, Mallabreen and Shardelle probably streaked it back fer the road ranch. Grore, I expect, will go back to his bride! Or mebbe he didn't come to town with his pals."

"Mebbe not."

"Anyway, we're bound to find two of 'em back at the road ranch. So—let's ride, cowboy!"

"Right!" Flagpole agreed grimly.

They struck a steady gait as they swung around in a short semi-circle toward The Swale. From behind a bank of clouds on the eastern horizon, the moon appeared, shedding a soft radiance over the hills. Mile after mile, the thud of the rhythmic hoofs drummed the earth. It was nearly midnight when Dan caught sight of the yellow lights gleaming from the windows of the Mallabreen road ranch.

They pressed their weary horses on, following the creek. At the corrals, some distance from the main building, they dismounted, and started making their way afoot among the several wagons and buckboards drawn up about the place. Guardedly, ever keeping to the shadows they advanced toward the main building.

Passing a long bunkhouse, they heard the snoring of men who, incited to weary miles of travel by false rumors of gold, lay on hard bunks dreaming of the nuggets which they would never find.

Suddenly Dan, walking in the lead, ducked behind a wagon, motioning Flagpole to do likewise. From the rear door of the main building two men had emerged, one of them reeling drunkenly and supported by his companion.

"Lay low," Dan whispered, hand on gun. "The sober gent's probably leadin' the drunk over to the bunkhouse. They'll be passin' right by us."

BUT this conjecture, only a moment later, proved wrong. The "sober gent" gave his companion a hard shove, sending the drunk sprawling to the ground. Immediately, the victim's pockets were rifled. He was left lying there while the man who had escorted him returned to the building.

"Huh!" mumbled the disgusted Flagpole. "Probably they couldn't get the drunk in a poker game, so they robbed him outside. That tubby mutt who done the pocket pickin' is the same rumsnoot that's been collectin' fresh meat for his boss, too."

"All right," Dan whispered, "we'll separate here. I'll go around to the front. You step in through the back door. And have your hand close to your gun, hombre!"

"You bet I will!" Flagpole assured

him grimly. "That tubby hombre knows who I am. And Shardelle and Mallabreen know who *you* are. If they make any foolish moves, they'll run into some hot lead!"

"*If* they make any foolish moves—yes. Good luck."

Two minutes later, Dan crossed the rectangle of light gleaming through the front doorway. The bartender, curiosity written on his pock-marked face, glanced up at the newcomer. So did the fleshy person who had just robbed the drunk.

Dan saw those looks, even as he observed Flagpole now stepping through the back door. Yet it was on Deck Shardelle, the gambler sitting at the poker table, that his attention centered. Mallabreen wasn't in sight. Slowly, yet without batting his pale eyes, Deck Shardelle met Dan's level, accusing gaze.

CHAPTER IV

Journey's End

"OH, hello, Rutledge!" he drawled, his real emotions concealed beneath his poker face. "I heard they had you locked up in the Twin Rock jail."

"They did," Dan's voice clicked. "But it was just a little misunderstandin', Shardelle. A certain low-down card shark—one of the five-ace kind—set a little trap for me. He bought some of my horses with the money that belonged to Emery Buchanan. Money that another skunk had given him. The other skunk, which yuh know without bein' told, was Stormy Grore."

While speaking, Dan edged closer and closer toward the poker table. He had an idea Shardelle would make the first move. But again he was wrong.

The tubby person who had been range-butchering Flagpole Pierce's steers had shifted his eyes from Dan to Flagpole standing in the rear door. Then he growled like a cornered mastiff—and whipped down for his gun. But he was a trifle slow. Flagpole's gun cleared leather, spat sharply. The fat man rocked backward against the bar, his thick hands pressed to his left side.

Deck Shardelle, realizing that he was cornered, was quick to take advantage of that momentary shift of attention. His slender, womanlike hand shot down to the gun on his hip. He, too, leaped to his feet with the speed of a startled deer.

Then Dan's gun spouted a flash of flame. Again it cracked. But this time it wasn't aimed at the gambler whose right arm had been ripped through with a bullet. The pock-faced bartender had attempted to take a hand in the shooting. Dan's second slug tore through his shoulder.

"Tie these skunks up, some of you gents!" Dan snapped to the gaping patrons of the road ranch.

"Wha—what is this? A holdup?" stammered one of the men.

"No—a clean-up! Where's Mallabreen? Any yuh gents seen him?"

"Yeah," answered a grey-haired man. "He come back a while ago with Shardelle, but he didn't stay long. Just changed horses, and rode away to the east."

"Shut up!" Shardelle rasped. "What business is it of yours? Gentlemen, this man's a jail breaker—"

"Back up against that wall there, Shardelle," Dan cut in evenly. "Yuh're goin' to answer a few questions. And if I was yuh, I'd answer 'em straight. It'll save yuh takin' a forty-five bullet right through yore middle."

Shardelle read the threat in those hard grey eyes—and obeyed.

"You say it ain't their business," Dan said, indicating the strangers in the room. "They're makin' a wild

goose chase after gold, ain't they? And there ain't any gold at Portal Pass! Tell 'em it's a lie that you and Mallabreen started—to drum up business at this dive!"

The gambler hesitated.

"He doesn't have to answer that," interrupted the grey-haired man who had spoken before. Pulling back his vest, he revealed a star pinned to his flannel shirt. "I'm investigating this fake Portal Pass gold strike. Jest come from there. I was figgerin' to arrest Shardelle and Mallabreen in the mornin!"

"Yuh're—an officer?" Flagpole gaped.

"Yep. Deputy sheriff—Hammond County. Chris Mallabreen didn't recognize me tonight. Took me to be another gold rusher. But I've got worse charges against him than just startin' a gold strike rumor. He used to lead the Mallabreen gang—he and a feller named Stormy Grore."

"Grore!" Dan said sharply. "So that's why they're pals."

The sheriff gaped now.

"You mean, young feller, that Stormy Grore's up in this country?"

"Yes. He married—"

"Dan!" a woman's voice cut in tersely.

WHIRLING, Dan saw Glory in the front door. Her red hair was disheveled, her pretty face pale and strained, her eyes wide with terror.

As he and Flagpole ran toward the girl, pandemonium broke loose. The men who had trailed miles on a wild goose chase were crowding threateningly around Shardelle, with the deputy sheriff bellowing for order. The other customers in the bunkhouse, awakened by the shooting, were running from the bunkhouse toward the building.

But Dan scarcely noticed them. He was staring at Glory.

"What are *you* doin' here, copper-top?"

"I had to know if Flagpole got you out of the jail in time," she panted. "I knew if he did, you'd both come here after Shardelle. Then, up there a little ways"—she pointed toward home—"I met a rider. He shot at me three times. Nearly hit me. One of his bullets just barely grazed my pony's hip!"

"Mallabreen!" Dan gritted, a new rush of rage pounding through his veins. "If he'd shot you—"

"Don't look like that, Dan!" A sob caught in her voice. "I'm all right!"

"But where was he headin' fer?" Flagpole cut in. "An' why in heck would the skunk try killin' a girl? Is he goin' to meet Grore and—"

"Grore?" asked the bewildered girl. "Why should he—"

"Shore, that's where he's goin'!" Dan interrupted savagely. "And since he's already took a few shots at Glory, I'll bet a dollar to a doughnut that other members of the Buchanan family'll be in fer it unless—"

"I get yuh! With all the Cross Arrow spread fallin' into Kate's hands, and with Mallabreen and Grore bosom pals, I'm beginnin' to see what's up. We've caught the coyote, Shardelle. But the two wolves are still loose. And they're achin' to sink their fangs into the Cross Arrow spread!"

"Right!" Dan clicked. "They've got my horses out there in the corral. I saw 'em. Let's catch fresh mounts and ride. Ride fast!"

Soon three horses were pounding the earth en route to the Buchanan ranch. Dan's lips were compressed tightly. He dared not tell the curious Glory the danger that must be hovering so near her father and brother. Yet she must already suspect that. Dan was glad that she didn't know, as he and Flagpole now

knew, that Chris Mallabreen and Stormy Grore, both wanted men, had ridden together in the same outlaw gang.

It wasn't far from Antelope Creek ford to the Cross Arrow. Tipping a low rise, Dan for the second time that night saw flames leaping into the sky. This time the fire was rising from the stack of wild hay near the Cross Arrow corrals. A cry burst from Glory's throat, but Dan quickly silenced her.

"Keep back, copper-top," he snapped. "I think Flagpole and me know what's goin' on."

Glory reined in, and the two men raced toward the burning haystack. Cries of alarm now came from the big ranchhouse. Then Dan saw old Emery Buchanan and his son Bobby run out into the night. Cowpunchers were tumbling out of the bunkhouse down by the creek, perhaps two hundred yards from the ranchhouse. With a sharp intake of breath, Dan suddenly sighted a figure standing beside a horse in a shadowed spot not far from the corrals. The figure moved as Emery Buchanan and his son hastened into the circle of light. It was Mallabreen, even now raising a rifle butt to his shoulder.

"Damn him!" Dan gritted, instantly realizing the other's murderous object.

Chris Mallabreen fired. Jerking his head to the left, Dan saw Bobby Buchanan stumble. Mallabreen was sighting the rifle again, when he heard those hoofbeats behind him. He whirled, blasted away at Dan, but his aim was hasty this time.

Three times Dan's gun cracked viciously. Mallabreen reeled like a drunken man, tried to raise his arms —and then crumpled.

Another gun was blazing from a clump of cottonwoods.

"Must be Grore!" Flagpole yelled. "Come on!"

But Flagpole's horse hadn't taken a dozen strides before it was shot down. Dan simply crouched lower in the saddle. He didn't slacken his pace until he gained the clump of trees. Here he reined in, slid out of the saddle. He could not see Grore, but a gun flash an instant later revealed the latter's position behind a huge cottonwood at the right.

Dan was about to dart behind the trunk of another tree when he sud-

denly heard the dull, metallic click of a firing pin striking a spent cartridge. Grore's gun was empty!

With a half-dozen tigerish strides, Dan reached the cottonwood. Grore, crouching behind it, was sliding fresh bullets into the firing chambers.

"No," Dan said gently, "I reckon you won't make it!"

GRORE spun around. He saw the look in Dan's eyes, saw the gun barrel centered on his chest—and dropped his weapon as if it were hot.

"Don't shoot, Rutledge," he said hoarsely, jerking up his arms.

Dan replaced his .45 in the holster.

"Yes," he drawled, "a bullet's too clean for a skunk like you—though it won't be long 'fore yuh'll be wishin' fer one."

And he leaped in. Once, twice, three times, his big fists smashed into Grore's face, sending him staggering backward. In vain, the other tried to cover up. Dan never even gave him a chance to regain his balance. His blue eyes blazing, he followed relentlessly—and ever his fists pounded! Blows that were deliber-

ately meant to hurt—to cut the skin, bruise the flesh. He was partly settling the score that Grore had piled up.

There came a time when Grore reeled about drunkenly, his eyes closed, his face a bloody horror. Twice his knees had buckled from under him. Each time he staggered to his feet again. It wasn't courage. Simply the desperation of a cornered animal.

Grore had gone down for the third time when footsteps sounded behind Dan. The gleam of a lantern penetrated the moonlight-mottled shadows of the trees. And then a hand touched Dan's arm, as he stood panting over Grore.

It was Glory's hand. Emery Buchanan, and the slightly wounded Bobby, were behind her. Then he saw the lank Flagpole with him; observed that Kate was leaning on his arm.

He reached down, jerked the still conscious Grore to a sitting position, and told him to start talking. Grore, all resistance beaten out of him, obeyed sullenly. He could gain nothing by lying now. His plans had been frustrated, his guilt revealed.

"Why else would I marry you?" he concluded, glaring up at Kate. "I've got a couple of Mex girls that'd make you look like—"

"Easy!" Flagpole cautioned. "Or I'll kick all them teeth that Dan loosened outa yore mug!"

"No, Flagpole," murmured the trembling Kate. "I deserve what I'm getting. Only—take me away."

They moved from the circle of lantern light.

"I guess Kate knows now who really loves her," Glory whispered to Dan. "They'll be all right—from now on."

"And how about us?" He smiled down at her.

"I guess you'll be all right, too," put in old Emery Buchanan, who had overheard Dan's remark. "Here's wishin' yuh luck, Dan. And if yuh'll move over here, make yore home at the Cross Arrow, I'll spend the rest of my days provin' that—"

"S'pose we talk about that later?" Dan gripped the proffered hand. "Jest now yuh'd better see about takin' Grore, and what's left of Chris Mallabreen, back to the road ranch. There's an old gent with a star on down there who'll be right glad to see 'em."

He took Glory's hand and led her away. They moved slowly from the shadows of the cottonwoods out into the moonlight. Neither spoke, yet both understood that they had emerged from shadows deeper than those cast by trees. Ahead lay brighter trails.

GUN THUNDER RESOUNDS
IN
WOLVES OF THE RANGE
An Exciting Complete Novel
By EUGENE A. CLANCY

In Next Month's THRILLING RANCH STORIES

After Five Days, Hiding from Justice, Jimmy Beck Gains a Lawman's Star, Pinned on his Vest by a Girl's Hand!

Beck grasped the bronc's rein, and his fingers tightened on the wrist of the girl

The Sudden Deputy

By LAWRENCE A. KEATING

Author of "Warring Hearts," "Horse Hate," etc.

JIMMY BECK, lately of the Flying O, headed his grey stallion toward the one-street cowtown of Prairie Dog. His pulse thumped slowly and his blue eyes were a-squint under the weathered, curly-brimmed sombrero. His lips formed a thin determined slash above his square chin. He was going to give himself up to the law.

Five days spent skulking in foothills and back gulches had decided him. Jimmy felt no remorse for that bullet sunk in the hide of pock-faced, ne'er-do-well Coyote Anderson back in Range City. But a wanted man led a furtive, animal life on the outtrails, gnawed by loneliness and constant apprehension of capture. Whoever was sheriff of Prairie Dog would

have heard Beck was in demand seventy-odd miles south. He was prepared to go back and stand trial for murder — if Coyote Anderson was dead. He feared Coyote was. His slug had taken the fellow in the chest.

Jimmy mulled it all over for the thousandth time. Sheriff Myers was certain to make an example of him. He was only twenty-four and the vision of penitentiary years stretching far over the hill of his life stabbed panic to Jimmy's heart. Made him draw a deep breath, his eyes closed.

But he kept the stallion trudging on. He was going to surrender.

Maybe his previous good record would help. Maybe he could manage some defense even though he had plunged for his Colt ahead of Anderson. The poker game in the Longhorn Saloon had been amiable enough until Coyote persisted in signaling Hank Timms the value of Jimmy's cards. What happened then happened fast. Fifty seconds saw Beck, a cloud of swirling alkali dust, down the road.

This town of Prairie Dog consisted of two lines of haggard-looking clapboard structures that faced a wide street. Jimmy slowed the stallion. He rubbed his chin, smoothed of five days' stubble with a razor borrowed this morning from a line rider. The street lay deserted. Not a human being in sight and only one animal, a spent-looking mustang at a hitchrail some distance away.

Beck touched a spur to the belly of his horse. He half expected a sharp hail to raise his hands, but none came. His reddish brows crinkled as, throwing a look under the half-doors of the Standard Bar, he failed to find a single pair of boots. No one in the General Dry Goods & Hardware, either. In fact, the place was closed. So also was the big stable, lettered, "Feed, Horse & Vehicle Rent, Abe Green, Prop."

The lone saddle nag bowed shamedly before a one-story brick-and-clay jail. Jimmy Beck swallowed in a vain attempt to moisten his throat gone suddenly arid as sand. He shoved his anthill hat back on his forehead. Drew another deep breath, and steered Captain for the hitchrail.

As he swung down he noticed the mustang's rawhide reins still around its neck. The horse remained as though hitched out of pure unwillingness to move. Jimmy tied his stallion reflecting that when next he forked it he would be a prisoner. Wearing manacles, probably. He started to duck under the pole between two posts — but halted. The mustang's saddle was smeared with blood. Very fresh blood, for it had not yet dried even in this roasting early afternoon sun.

JIMMY hitched his cloth pants, moved his cartridge belt for better comfort. He crossed the plank sidewalk to the jail door. His knock was sharp lest his keyed-up nerve suddenly evaporate. The impulse tugged at him to get back on Captain and leave— Was he crazy, aiming to surrender when he could get away, get to Canada if he wanted?

His mind was made up and he stayed. But as he twisted a quirly with fingers that shook a little, Beck frowned at the blank oak door. Not a sound came from within. The jail was as deserted as the town looked to be.

Then he heard a shout, followed swiftly by sharp pounding. Jimmy trudged around the corner of the jail to learn whence that noise came. He had his cigarette alight when he got to the rear of the hoosegow and saw a small corral where two persons were fighting a red bronc, trying to get the saddle on it.

"Sheriff around?"

The bronc's left forefoot stabbed

out. It narrowly missed the flush-faced girl with yellow hair tossing about her temples and cheeks. She leaped from danger in the nick of time. But she clung with both hands to the headstall straps, her slim body straight, spurred heels dug into the dust while the white-eyed horse steadily hauled her as it backed. She was not heavy enough to hold the brute while a man vaguely seen in choking swirls of dust got the saddle on.

The bronc humped queerly. Jimmy cried a warning—prompted by the fact that she was nice looking and a girl. She all but lost her grip as she turned startedly. The next instant he had wriggled between the bars. He grabbed one strap, gave the horse a cuff on the muzzle that shot its head up, and seized the other.

"Put 'er on now!" he yelled.

The girl staggered from an unintended blow of Jimmy's elbow. The fellow in the cloud of dust made some quick movements while the bronc, discovering himself flanked by juniper bars and held prisoner in front despite all the slashing of forefoot he could manage, began to calm.

"She's on!" The man jumped away. Jimmy Beck let go, watched a moment, and saw the bronc was now quite docile. He turned to the girl to find her dark, deep eyes fixed upon him. She was engaged in stuffing a plenitude of that gleaming yellow hair under a worn Stetson. Jimmy found her of considerably more interest to look at than any girl he could at the moment recall.

"Who are you?"

"Well, I've been ridin' for Burt Walters' Flyin' O. That's down near Range City. I came in to see if the sheriff—"

"Oh, don't be long-winded—we haven't a minute to waste!" She turned impatiently to the other man, who would be a few years less than thirty. He had grey eyes constantly on the move and a sharp chin and a dry, masklike expression. He was engaged in dusting himself off, though his blue shirt and threadbare pants looked scarcely worth the bother. "Al, here's help. We can trust anyone Burt Walters would hire. Dan knows Burt from years back."

She hurried through the corral gate. "Wait here. Have you a horse? Wait; I'll be right out."

He opened his mouth to speak but the girl broke into a light run toward a frame cottage next the jail. Jimmy followed her with perplexed eyes until the rear door slammed. He shifted weight and looked back to the man. With a start he discovered a shiny, five-pointed star hooked through a loop of the fellow's cartridge belt.

"I—reckon you're a lawman, which is what I'm lookin' fer. You see, Sheriff Myers down at Range—"

"Ain't a regular one." He moved out of the corral leading the bronc. Jimmy followed. "Jest sworn in special. Dan Underwood's sheriff here, if that's what you want. He's shot up pretty bad. The doc's with him and don't know if Dan is gonna live."

THE cottage door banged, preventing more talk. It was the girl again, running toward them with a heavy black book. "Here," she panted, "you! Put your left hand on this Bible. Now raise your—right. No, no, just raise it with your palm flat. Like this." She seized his fingers and arranged them straight.

"But hold on, Lita, he—"

She ignored her companion. "Do you swear to uphold the law of Prairie County with all your ability and to the best of your understanding of said law? Do you swear in the sight of God and Al here, and me, to capture all malefactors and—well, lawbreakers, of course, and to

do the right thing, and enforce peace with your six-gun if you have to? Well," she panted, "you know what I mean! Do you solemnly swear it?"

Jimmy stared. "But hold on, I ain't a fit one—"

"*Please* don't waste time! If we're going to capture this rascal we've got to hurry!"

"Huh? What rascal?"

She sighed with exasperation. "What on earth does it matter *what* rascal if there *is* a rascal to capture? But if you *must* know, the man who held up my brother, Sheriff Underwood, two hours ago. Not even that long. Oh, maybe Dan will die—he's in the house. Doctor Sprague is doing all he can. But if we can capture this Jimmy Beck, Dan may recover. I mean, he is that way. He gasped out to Al Gowan here and me that the bullet wouldn't kill him as fast as shame might. His pride. Losing that county payroll, don't you see? There hasn't been a gun job here since—"

She left off, puzzled. The newcomer had retreated a pace. His amazed blue eyes traveled from the girl to the man called Al Gowan. Dumbfounded, he wet his lips, and again. "Y-you say J-Jimmy Beck?"

"YES, Jimmy Beck! Dan told us the name—the man was so cocksure he was defiant, said the law would never grab him. But don't stand there like a post! Al and I are going after this killer and thief. You're going too. I don't know if it's legal, but it will just have to be: my deputizing you. Here, keep your hand on the Bible. You haven't answered yet. Do you swear faithfully and without reservation to uphold the law of Prairie County?"

His brain teemed with confused thoughts. He felt hot and cold by turns, felt a great sense of unreality. A holdup, a shooting of her brother Dan, sheriff here. Some fellow calling himself Jimmy Beck—

He shrugged helplessly. Jimmy was common, of course, and Beck wasn't unheard of. Was there in this vicinity another man of his name?

"Swear!" insisted Lita Underwood.

Jimmy cleared his throat. The blue of his eyes took on a frosty tinge and the square jaw of his jutted out. "I shore do swear, Miss."

"Right!" With a snap she placed the Bible on a convenient empty box. To Jimmy's surprise she stepped close to him and worked with quick, deft fingers at the breast pocket of his flannel shirt. He strove to organize all this into something sensible, but he was unable to concentrate because keenly and appreciatively aware of her nearness. Of the girl's turned-up nose with a half dozen freckles peppered there, and the long glossy lashes and dark brows that were pleasant contrast with her yellow hair, and the moist, red, bowed lips.

"There. What did you say your name is?"

He had prepared for that. "Call me Earl Keller."

"Where's your horse?"

"Out front. Reckon he'll do."

"Al"—to Gowan—"take him to the jail office. Get him a carbine and ammunition. I'll meet you in front. I want to tell Dan we've found another man and we are starting."

Lita Underwood caught up the black family Bible and again ran for the cottage. Gowan jerked his head at Earl Keller. Without a word he led the way into the jail by a side door, and to the office which Jimmy saw at once was the headquarters of the local sheriff.

"Say, jest what's this all about? Things shore happen fast around here!" Automatically Beck accepted a carbine, examined it, and took the box of shells extended. Gowan seemed a queer fish, silent, his face a mask as though he had no emotions. Jimmy was not at all drawn

to him. And he had a hunch that Al Gowan felt no particular joy at his coming.

"Why, jest like Lita said. The county's buildin' an irrigation dam—"

"That's where everyone is, eh? Town's shore deserted."

"Folks went out to watch the sluice gate put in. Sort of holiday. We've had hard times and every able-bodied man's workin' except the cowhands that still got jobs."

"That includes you?"

"Not exactly," the fellow drawled in a chill tone. "I run six thousand head on my A G Box." After a steady look he moved to the street door, picked up several letters and papers someone had tucked under it, and tossed them on the desk. "Yesterday's mail for Dan."

Jimmy felt sudden interest in that mail. He edged toward it. "Yuh were sayin' about a payroll?"

"Dan got it from the county treasurer and he was ridin' fer the place on Blue Creek where the dam's goin' up. A feller plugged him in the shoulder, knocked him off his hoss. Before Dan could get his gun the feller had the payroll. Out of cussedness that mangy cur shot him again in the belly. Said he was Beck from Range City and plenty tough. Somehow or other Dan managed to git back home alive. But he'll die, I reckon."

The wanted man had his back to the desk. "And yuh happened to be with Lita when her brother came in?"

"Me and Lita are fixin' to get married."

Beck showed his surprise. But he made no comment, delaying as the other stepped to the door at the side. "I'll fetch my hoss."

It gave Jimmy his chance. The second letter, his alert eyes had seen, bore a Range City postmark. In the upper left corner of the envelope was the legend, "G. R. Myers, Sheriff of Boone County." Jimmy snatched it, stuffed it in his trousers pocket, then casually sauntered after Gowan. Undoubtedly that letter was to inform Sheriff Underwood that James Beck was wanted for the shooting of Coyote Anderson—

Lita appeared on the bronc that had been hard to saddle. It was a little spooky yet but manageable. While Jimmy ducked under the hitchrail for his Captain, Al Gowan appeared mounted.

"We better head for the place he was shot," the rancher proposed as they started at a lope down the deserted street toward the rugged mountains several miles west.

"Yuh say it's about two hours since your brother got hit? Then it isn't likely Beck is still there. Maybe we could strike south a ways and cut into the foothills. If we cross Blue Creek we might pick up his trail." Jimmy watched their faces. "He wouldn't hang around much—he'd make tracks right off."

"LOSE him that way. Our best chance—"

"Al, I'm inclined to think Mr. Keller is right." Lita wore a thoughtful look. "Yes, it would just be another waste of time. Let's *do* head southwest. We'll surely cross his trail. He won't go north because it's open country. Hiding will be better if he stays in the hills." She spurred her bronc faster, forcing the men to follow suit.

Gowan opened his mouth to object, but closed it again. The girl could not hear him anyhow, from her lead position. Jimmy Beck, watching slyly, saw the plan adopted by a two-thirds vote did not suit the A G Box owner. But Gowan kept silent.

Prairie Dog was left behind. They rode at a fast pace over the swelling rangeland toward the low purple hills. Fifteen minutes passed, half an hour. There was little opportu-

nity for talk and everything of importance appeared to have been said. Watching Sheriff Underwood's sister, Jimmy revised his estimate of her—upward. She was genuinely nice to look at. A girl had character, he reflected, to be so cool and calm on the trail of a would-be killer when her nearest relative lay at death's door and undoubtedly she longed to stay at his side until the crisis passed.

Their route lay through a cut hemmed in by juniper and boxwood and purple-edged Colorado spruce. Beck recognized a landmark here and there for he had come this way not many hours back—although he had kept away from the trail proper lest he meet someone he did not wish to meet.

At last Lita Underwood drew rein. "Here's the creek. Now let's see if we can discover tracks. But probably he walked his horse through the water, and wouldn't leave any tracks!"

JIMMY shook his head. "Don't think he did. The bed's too soft here. It would make hard walkin' for the hoss. Anyhow, that gent wanted to put miles under him. A man that tells his name right out wouldn't hang around any. He'd get a long ways quick as his hoss could travel."

As he spoke he swung to the ground and began carefully to inspect the bank of the humming mountain stream whose pale color gave its name. Lita and Gowan walked up and down on the same errand but reported no success. Jimmy forked the stallion again and urged it through the rushing cold water. The others came after and resumed their search.

"Funny. Yuh'd think he'd come along here. But there isn't a sign of fresh tracks." The wanted man scratched his cheek reflectively. Gowan remained silent as ever, his dark pointed face a mask of his real feelings. Lita looked worried and impatient. She kept touching the big, heavy Colt .45 that swung on the thigh of her dark divided skirt, fingering the rubber butt of the gun while her troubled eyes sought to penetrate the stand of trees.

"It will be dark soon. Then we will have lost him for certain.. Al," she questioned, "what shall we do now? We can't let that man escape! Why, it would almost bankrupt the county, to say nothing of killing Dan. Times have been so hard—"

"Don't stir yoreself up, Miss," Beck soothed. "We haven't played all our cards yet. There's always a chance."

"If there is, what do yuh suggest?" The rancher was frankly skeptical.

Jimmy looked him over coolly. For a chap engaged to Lita Underwood, he certainly was a cold proposition. Which struck Beck as odd. How could a fellow so lacking emotion win such a girl? She was the epitome of warm-heartedness; it was more than evident in the alert interest of her dark eyes and in her vivacious manner and movements whether she was a-saddle or afoot. They sure looked a strange pair. Must be Lita saw qualities in Al Gowan which a stranger could not see.

He stared down at the nickel star that sagged the pocket of his shirt. One hand went to his trousers pocket where the letter from Sheriff Myers of Range City reposed, which he had purloined for safety. Somehow that star and letter gave him a sense of responsibility—or was it smoldering wrath at the fact the holdup had passed out his name, Jimmy Beck?

Or—watching Lita—was it a sort of inspiration that made him yearn to get his hands on the payroll-grabber?

He turned decisively and climbed

astride Captain. "There's no chance of him followin' close to the creek now. We're shore of that. Let's strike higher in the hills on the hope we cross his trail. Like you say—er, Lita, we've got to get some clue before it's dark. After that we might as well call it off and go home. Let's mosey west. Good as anything, ain't it?"

Gowan looked as though he wanted to object but had no persuasive reason. After momentary hesitation Lita assented. She rode after Jimmy who broke the trail among the thick fir trees. The mask-faced rancher brought up the rear—seemed to like that position.

It was growing dark in the timber section. The sun was a reddening disc high at the bare peaks of the mountains, its heat gone and its light dimming. They would have to get on the trail of the stick-up artist before another half hour passed or he had made good his challenge and getaway.

SUDDENLY Beck raised a hand in warning. His stallion stood stock still until Lita edged her bronc beside him. Gowan, to deepen the riddle of his queerness, began to hum a range song. A sharp gesture stopped him.

"What's the idea? Nobody there," Gowan objected.

Jimmy looked at the girl, then to the tumbled log shack ahead. It stood at a tipsy angle, leaning downhill. Stumps of pine dotted the clearing. No light came from the gloomy looking structure, nor was there any sign of a horse. Beck was afoot and touching at the sleeve of Lita's blouse. She dismounted.

"These branches are fresh broken. Here's a couple of hoof-marks. I noticed somebody broke off a good-sized branch back a few yards, and the way it was done pointed right here." His eyes glowed with hope. "Lita, it may be our man came along just a while ago!"

She stared in a long semi-circle. Gowan's grunt of disbelief made them both start.

"Might have busted that branch early this mornin'. No use gettin' feverish to grab the ambush feller, Lita, whenever yuh hear a fairy story that sounds like it's right out o' some book. What reason have we got—"

"Ssh! Not so loud, Al," she begged.

Jimmy felt the red creep up his neck. "Mebbe I am talkin' crazy. But when yuh're after a holdup and have no more to go on than we've had, an old line shack will bear lookin' at." He did not try to conceal his resentment. The fellow had made no suggestions of his own that were any help, but he seemed plenty glad to throw sneers at whatever was said, thinly hopeful though it might be.

"I'll slip over on the far side," Beck continued. "I'll leave my carbine here; rather use my Colt. Lita, yuh better stay with the hosses. Watch that busted pine. Yuh'll be able to see me wave. Gowan can close in on one side while I come from the other."

"Close in on an empty line shack? Be awful cautious, Mister Keller. We don't want you shot up."

Jimmy felt cheap. He hurled a look at the man, then left them. Circling the cleared space, he soon arrived at the point he had named. With a bandanna he waved until he was sure they had seen, even in the dusky half-light. Gun in hand, Jimmy stalked forward, his course directed at a long side wall of the rickety cabin.

Not that he really expected anything to happen when he did look into the place. But he hoped against hope something would. Lita was growing more apprehensive every moment, and he wanted some sort of action, even if feigned, to distract

her. Worry about her brother had begun to make the girl wish she had stayed back in Prairie Dog. Jimmy saw that; he had watched with keen interest. This foolish wild goose chase had to have some semblance of importance or Lita Underwood would feel she could never forgive herself for having left Dan's bedside while he lay hurt, perhaps in a dying condition.

Jimmy was close to the cabin. Its sides had lost some of their clay chinking and one big log had worked loose at the pidgeoned end. The place looked as though it had not seen a human for several years.

A window opening gave him the chance to peer in. He heard no movement, saw nothing. Jimmy decided to enter and light matches for a better look around. He lifted a foot, thrust it over the sill, and a moment later dropped within. He brought out a match and drew it along his thigh. The crimson flame lifted—

"Reach, you—quick!"

It took him wholly unawares. He had heard no step though he had listened for one. With a curse Beck whipped away his match and fired.

The roar of another gun preceded his by a fraction of a second. Something pierced his side like the stab of a glowing poker. It staggered him, whirled him around. He crashed against the wall of the cabin and felt the cool air of the very window he had entered.

Jimmy shot again—and a third time. Gathering his strength he dove at the window. It was low, and he plunged through it to land on hard earth with a jar that brought new flashes of pain from his wound. But he was outside, full length on the ground, his brown fist still clutching his gun—

Lita Underwood's cry was followed by light running steps. "Al! Al, are you all right?"

There was a growl and a curse. "Listen," the man snapped rapidly, "it was jest like I figgered all along. But I wasn't shore till now. Lita, that guy's crooked. Thought it was funny he kept tryin' to ride last! And when he wanted to come in here I knew. The low-down skunk tried to kill me, that's what!

"But I was ready for him. Lita, he's gone—yore friend Earl Keller. Alias Jimmy Beck—and it's him, I'll bet anything. It's Beck himself, for I saw him steal a letter from Sheriff Myers to yore brother Dan, back in the jail office!"

They came outside. Jimmy lay motionless, his ears straining while he gathered his strength. His fingers roving to the source of the pain in his side came away damp and sticky. The bullet must have scraped his ribs.

FOOTSTEPS came nearer. Swiftly he snaked to a protective clump of dogberry bushes. He crouched in their black shadow and watched Al Gowan, six-gun alert, strode past. Lita followed, tremulous with excitement. At the corner of the line shack Gowan halted.

"He got away, curse him! Listen, he's our man. There ain't a doubt about it. Else why did he steal Myers' letter to Dan? But he's wanted, that's what. The talk about Burt Walters' Flyin' O was smooth but I hunched from his face while he said it there was somethin' rotten. Didn't let on 'cause you seemed to like him. I bet he's Jimmy Beck that shot Dan!"

"Then he must have the payroll, Al! But why did he come to town?"

"Don't know. Mebbe to make shore Dan was dead. The lobo! Lita, we've got to grab that feller, honey. But we need more men to comb these woods right. Listen: we ain't more'n a mile from the dam. You git yore hoss and fog there. Bring back six

or eight men—all yuh kin. I'll stay here and hunt. I plugged him, so mebbe he didn't git far. Come on, Lita," he finished urgently.

They hurried around the line shack corner and were gone.

Jimmy rose. His side ached and for a moment he battled grey dizziness. But there was no time to be lost. He plunged toward a trail they had crossed which must lead to the irrigation dam. If he failed to encounter the girl it was all off—

Reaching the trail, he clasped a pine trunk to steady himself. After a moment hoofbeats reached him and he prepared. When a dark form loomed several yards away Jimmy

lurched out. He grabbed the bronc's near rein with such swiftness that it reared up with a frightened whinny. Beck's right hand shot for the raising hand of the girl. His hard fingers closed over her wrist and he gave a sudden jerk.

SHE gave a cry of pain. Her gun fell. The next instant Lita Underwood toppled into his arms.

The nearness of her sent a thrill through him. Her Stetson was thrust back and the softness of the yellow hair brushing his cheek, the frightened struggle of Sheriff Underwood's sister, prompted him to clutch her harder while he sought to cover her lips with one palm.

"Lita, Lita! Yuh got to keep quiet while I do some talkin'. Listen, I'm no holdup. Honest, I didn't stop yore brother and take that money!" He left off to grab her more firmly. She was on her feet now and struggling angrily to wrench away. But he kept his hand over her lips and despite the electric twinges from his wounded side, bent her back out of muscular control.

"Give me a chance—yuh got to! I'm Jimmy Beck, shore. But I never stole a nickel, I tell yuh! I—" He choked. "I shot a man over to Range City five days ago. Coyote Anderson it was, over a poker game. Been hidin' out since. I rode into Prairie Dog to give myself up and be taken back to Range City. But yuh made a mistake and—"

He stopped. Worn out, she ceased struggling and lay a limp, slender figure of femininity in his arms. Jimmy released her. With a quick motion he scooped her gun off the ground. He pressed it butt-first into her cold hand then stepped quickly away.

"We're going back to the cabin. I got a mighty strong hunch somethin'll happen there, soon. Go on—poke that thing at me! It won't make any difference. Yuh won't shoot. You *can't*. Come along and we'll find out if I'm right. If I'm not, then I swear I'll go back to town with yuh peaceable!"

It was a queer method of persuasion, to hand the girl her own Colt which he had but a moment since wrenched from her grasp. Lita Underwood could not puzzle it out swiftly enough. She was panting and dazed and confused. But while she held the six-gun muzzle hard against his stomach, with her forefinger crooked around the trigger, he talked on. Imploringly. Urgently. And he was cool, not the least fearful.

It had a strange effect. Finally she lowered the gun. "I—I can't understand it!" She leaned quite near to search his face in the deep shadow.

Jimmy felt they dared spend no more time here. "You got my promise. Now come on back. Leave your hoss—we'll get him later. Be quiet. Don't make a sound or talk!"

Wholly ignoring the threat of her .45, he followed his words by turning away. Lita Underwood caught her breath. She raised the weapon again—but did not shoot. She could not shoot a man in the back. It was confused determination to keep the drop on him that made her follow.

They covered fifty or more yards before Beck turned off the trail. He picked his way among the trees to approach the line shack from the window side he had approached before. All unexpectedly he jerked back, his sharp heel on the toe of her boot.

"There's a light!"

They scarcely breathed. Inside the cabin a light did flicker, a candle. Jimmy turned very slowly to put his face near the face of the girl.

"Keep behind me."

Crouching, he moved silent as a wraith to the window. He had forgotten his wound save that he was vaguely conscious of moisture trickling down his side. Under the window Jimmy paused. His hand slid along the girl's arm to find her shoulder. He forced her to crouch yet lower. Then he raised to a standing position.

"Yuh're covered. Drop yore guns!"

THE scene that met his gaze included two men. One was seated at the rickety slab table near the fireplace. He had a canvas sack at his elbow and he was engaged in sorting its contents, silver and paper bills, into two piles on the table. The second man, Al Gowan, held the candle in his left hand, his right at the thigh clasping a Colt.

Gowan's back was turned. He whirled as if on a pivot. *Wham! Crash!* Fire tongued from the six-guns to leave in its wake little puffs of acrid grey smoke.

Gowan staggered clutching his hip. His gun clattered across the table and fell out of reach. His spur caught on the hard plank floor and he sprawled heavily on his back.

"Don't move!" Jimmy yelled to the fellow with the cash.

He obeyed. But the glittering black eyes showed how he longed to slide one hand off the slabs to his holster. Jimmy kept the drop on both men while over his shoulder he ordered Lita around to the door. She entered, pale, her red lips quivering. But she was game! She picked up the candle which had kept alive as it toppled, and fixed it on the hewn shelf of the fireplace. She scooped up Gowan's .45, then disarmed the second man as at Beck's crisp order he slid his stool back and rose with palms ear-high.

Jimmy hurried to the door and entered. He strode straight for the second hombre. His lips curled in contempt and a sneer of triumph. He couldn't resist gloating. This little act was going to mean a powerful lot to him.

"Lita, these two piles o' cash tell plenty. Yore friend Gowan and Coyote Anderson here fixed it up to rob yore brother. Coyote did the actual job, not a doubt of it. He's that kind."

He looked the fellow up and down. "Thought I'd killed yuh, Coyote. Too bad in a way I didn't. Where'd yuh git it?"

"In the chest," the fellow growled.

Jimmy swung a thigh on the table. With narrowed eyes he kept Anderson covered while Al Gowan crawled cursing to his knees, then to his feet.

"I'm Beck, Lita, like I told you. I been ridin' fer Burt Walters, Flyin' O over near Range City. Had a card game in the saloon that ended with a shootin'. I left town sudden

because I thought I'd killed Coyote. Sheriff Myers would shore make an example of me I figured, 'cause he'd been tellin' around what he'd do to the next pair that swung their guns too fast. Coyote must have rustled from town pretty quick after I did.

"I hid out since last Saturday. Finally I made up my mind to give up. Prairie Dog was nearest and I rode in lookin' for a lawman to surrender to. You kind of took me off my feet when you pinned on this star."

HE shrugged, grinning, though his face was grey, and colored specks danced before his eyes. "Coyote told your brother at the holdup he was Jimmy Beck. He knew I've been dodgin' the law, apparently. Thought it was a good one to pin this job on me."

Lita watched his face with eyes that were deep and glowing. "Let's start back," Jimmy proposed in an uncertain voice. "I don't—feel so good."

"Yuh can't arrest me!" Gowan blustered. "I'm as much a deputy sheriff as you are!"

Lita Underwood raised her Colt to bear on him. She was very pale but her dimpled chin was set and her look of cold contempt made the rancher flinch. "I'll take that star back, Al Gowan. I swore you in, so I can—well, I guess I can swear you out, too! You're under arrest, both you men. And Jimmy Beck, I believe every word you say. Gowan is in danger of losing his ranch because he is a deadbeat and his creditors won't listen any longer. That gives his motive here. I—I think perhaps my brother will like having a new deputy. A permanent one, if you want the job."

Jimmy looked at her. He felt sick but happy, a queer combination. The illness was from his bullet wound. He grinned twistedly at the thought that an arrow in his heart made him happy. An invisible arrow from the bow of that fellow Cupid.

His lips parted—but then he concluded not to say it. Doggone! What he thought was that if it lay within his power, Lita's brother was going to have something more than a new deputy sheriff. Dan Underwood was going to have a new relative just as soon as Jimmy could get that yellow-haired, dark-eyed girl to whisper "yes!"

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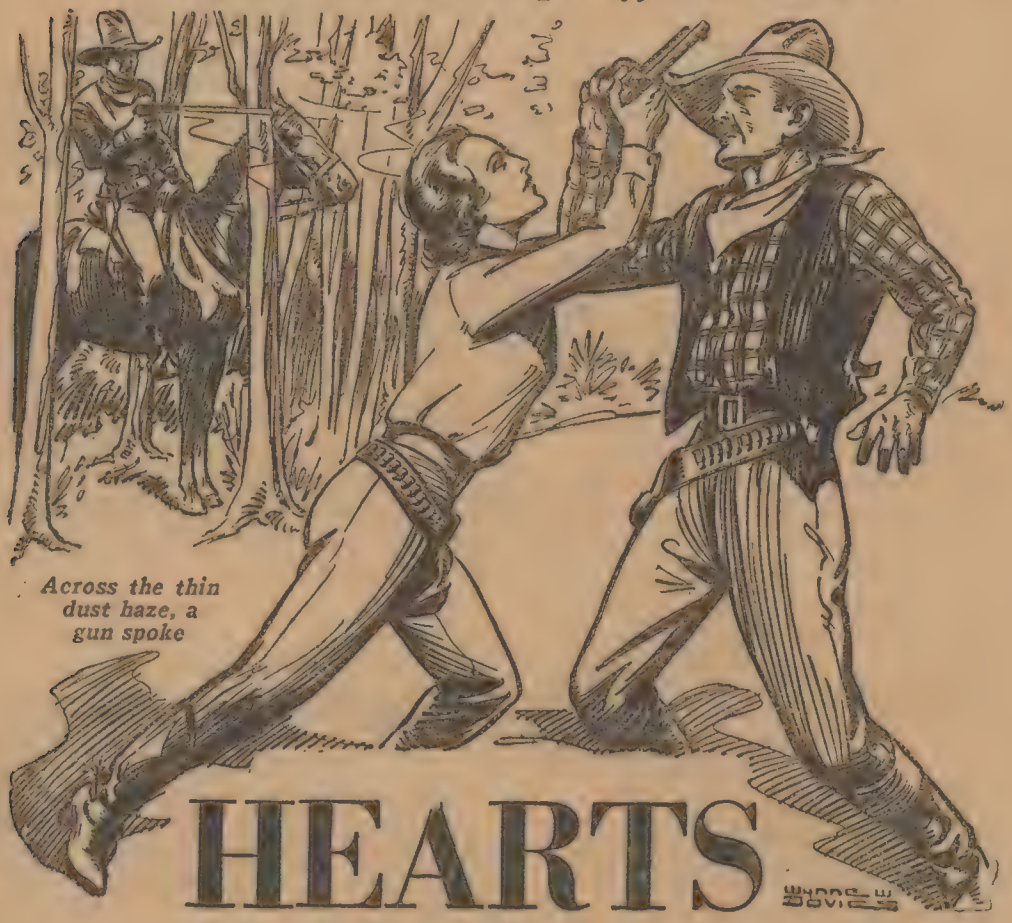

Across the thin dust haze, a gun spoke

HEARTS *and* Floursacks

By SYL MacDOWELL

Author of "Queen of Skull Valley," "The Last Holdup," etc.

LEM LARKIN, boss of the Lazy L, was worried. Here it was, close onto fall roundup, and the outfit was short-handed. Bud Miggle was laid up with a broken leg. Johnny Roberts, one of his best cut-out hands, had collided with a .45 slug at the Dry Falls Saloon on last payday. Two other good men had quit during the summer.

That left him with a four-man outfit to bring two-three hundred head of "weaners," or spring calves, down out of the high range before snow flew. And it was late September already. A particularly crisp morning, around sunup, as Larkin lingered by the home corral, his frosty breath mixed with the smoke of a before-breakfast cigarette, won-

dering where he could rake up an extra hand or two.

In a pinch he could count on Lila, he told himself. Larkin's daughter, going on eighteen, was as useful as some men in saddle work. But he needed another circle horse bad, for the high country was rugged and hard to work. And the whole surrounding puncher population was hired up by the bigger outfits.

As he fretted by the corral, there was a rattle of stovelids in the cookshack, and the lusty lyrics of "Suds" Soper, his old cook, fitted to an old-time cowboy tune, floated out:

> Home, home on the range,
> Where I labor my innards away,
> I'd rather ride herd,
> Whatever occurred,
> Than stay in an' spoil grub all day.

Lem Larkin, accustomed to Suds' songs, was too deep in his own troubles to notice. Then the cook, with the accompaniment of another stovelidful, began his second verse:

> Home, home on the range,
> I never have no time to play,
> I give yuh my word,
> It's mighty absurd,
> To work like a sinner this way.

The song suddenly produced an idea in Lem Larkin's mind. He dropped his cigarette, heeled it out, and headed for the cook shack.

"By thunder!" he muttered under his breath. "Why didn't I think o' this before?"

SUDS was stunned by the boss' blunt announcement.

"Listen here!" Larkin blurted. "Soon's the coffee boils, you come along out with the boys! Yuh been bellerin' about some healthy outdoor occupation. Well, yuh got it! Yuh are punchin' Lazy L cattle fer the next two-three weeks, Suds!"

Suds Soper was a sad-eyed, baldish man and he stared at the brisk, chesty boss as if he had gone loco.

"F-but who in blazes will rassle vittles?" he quavered, wiping his knobby hands on a flour sack apron. "Miss Lila, she shore fights shy o' kitchen work. She—"

"The gal, she's a worse grub spoiler than you! Here's my notion. A few days back Frenchy was here—drifted down from Powder Crick—"

"But Frenchy, he's a danged sheepherder!" wailed Suds.

"What of it? He kin cook. He's in Dry Falls now an' out of a job. Cooks are easier to corral than cowpunchers. Now git a wiggle on. This outfit's lightin' out by noon!"

As Lem Larkin finished and turned toward the door, "Moose" McGee, the Lazy L foreman, bulked in the opening. Bad-tempered and quick-fisted, Moose was the main reason that the Lazy L could seldom keep good men. If he could bully them, they drifted on. If he couldn't, he usually fired them.

He scowled as he overheard Larkin's order.

"I wouldn't hire that frog-eater!" he objected. "He's plumb saturated with sheep smell. Also, he's the biggest drunk in seventeen counties. Ten to one, he's drunk right now."

"Then it's yore job to sober him up!" snapped Larkin. "And see that he don't stash no likker in the chuck wagon. Now wrap yoreself around some breakfast an' hit out fer Dry Falls in the buckboard. Don't come back without him, drunk or sober."

Larkin pushed past the growling foreman and headed for the ranchhouse to rouse out Lila. Halfway across the yard, he heard his daughter's rippling laughter. It came from the direction of the corral. He spun around and saw her perched on the top bar of the corral gate. Leaning beside her was the newest member of the Lazy L outfit, a looped rope swinging from his hand.

This youngster, Rex North, had connected with the Lazy L payroll less than a month before. He was slim-built, with a pair of trusting

blue eyes in a smooth-tanned face. Nobody seemed to know where he had come from or why. But he was lightning fast with a rope; faster even, than the late Johnny Roberts had been. A born cut-out man.

He was fast with his six-gun, too. Moose McGee had seen him light six matches poked in the sand at twelve paces with six shots. The foreman thereafter had accorded North a grudging respect. More than he usually accorded a new hand.

Larkin stomped toward the corral. The early, slanting sun made a pleasant picture of the gay young pair. But he had no eyes for it. His crackling voice cut into their talk.

"We're makin' camp t'night on Gunsight Pass," he announced. "The cavvy moves on ahead, *pronto*. Git leather under yuh, youngster."

Lila slid down from the gate bar. Her cheeks were flushed by the crisp air, and her grey eyes sparkled. She was a dainty miniature of her father, even to the small, spurred boots and tucked-in levipants, the neckerchief knotted at her slender throat and a wide riding belt that made her waist seem even slimmer than it really was.

Her father saw the unspoken plea in her face now, and his impatience turned to gruff affection.

"Also, since this jigger ain't familiar with the high range, mebbe yuh'd better sorta help him haze the hosses along," he added. "Now git yore duffle in the wagon an' make tracks."

With a small delightful sound, the girl ran for the house. An hour later, she and young North started for the upper country, driving twenty Lazy L horses ahead of them.

Moose McGee's moody, resentful eyes watched them ride toward the far, timbered mountains. He was hooking up a fractious team to the buckboard.

"Yuh'd think this was a blasted picnic!" he snorted. "Before this is over, I'll work the wire edge off'en that *hombre*."

The cavvy was well on its way to Gunsight Pass when the chuck wagon and the rest of the outfit trailed away from the home spread. Moose McGee had brought Frenchy from Dry Falls. He propped him up on the wagon seat and thrust the reins into his hands.

Frenchy had reached the headache stage.

"Who say I want dis job, hey?" he complained. "By Gar, I don't lak it!"

"Push them cayuses into their collars an' shut up!" Moose ordered unsympathetically.

Suds Soper awkwardly forked a rusty roan. As the outfit rolled away from the ranch he lifted his cracked voice in another stanza of his endless song:

> Home, home on the range,
> Oh, parley voo whiskey Francais,
> There seldom is heard,
> A intelligent word,
> As he whittles spuds by the day!

It was late afternoon when Rex North and Lila reached Gunsight Pass. They herded the cavvy into the circular, cedarpole corral and the young puncher began rope-dragging firewood into the clearing by the corral.

THE day had passed quickly for them both. Lila felt that she knew this man. He seemed like an old friend, except at times when her questions touched on his past. Then his face clouded and his answers became vague.

When the other Lazy L riders arrived, a fire had been started. Frenchy and the chuck wagon pulled in about dark. Suds was stretched beside the warming blaze, rubbing the unaccustomed saddle weariness out of his legs. He saw Rex North

pull his bedroll out of the wagon. Then Frenchy dismounted. The young puncher's face froze to sudden hardness. He dropped his bedroll and dodged away in the shadows.

He was mysteriously absent when the seven other members of the outfit squatted in the firelight at supper. Moose McGee wolfed his grub hurriedly and made a suspicious tour beyond the fire.

He returned, grunting:

"Huh, it's like I figgered! Rolled up in his soogans already! Let's on as how it's a spell o' mountain sickness. Spell o' plain laziness, I'd say."

When Lem Larkin raised the call of roll out and roll up at dawn, a more disturbing discovery was made. Rex North was gone. And in the commotion that resulted, Lila Larkin was strangely silent. As silent as she had been during the night when she saw him creep cautiously out of his blankets, fill a pair of saddle bags with food, then catch up his horse and ride away under a clouded moon.

MOOSE McGEE'S suspicions were fanned into accusation.

"There's only one answer to it," he rasped. "I mighta knowed it when I seen fresh hoss tracks down canyon yesterday."

The girl, eyes gone suddenly dark, spoke up quickly:

"What are you driving at?"

McGee gulped a steaming tin cup of coffee.

"I got a notion," he stated, wiping his mouth with the back of a hand, "that we'll find a good many Lazy L cows minus calves. And I got jest as strong a notion that yore amiable friend knows where them yearlings went."

"Nonsense!" she scoffed. But her heart was beating wildly, and her face paled. She lingered in camp as the others left. Suds, with whom she was to ride that day, waited by the corral. Frenchy, with more energy than he had hitherto shown, hurriedly cleared up the remains of breakfast, went to the wagon and hauled out of it a Marlin .32-20 that belonged to Larkin. He crammed loads into the magazine.

Suds rode up. "The only need yuh'd have fer that gun, fur's I kin see," he declared, "is to blast open some o' them biscuits like yuh dished out this mornin'."

The new cook's small, shifty eyes didn't lift to the man in the saddle. They were fixed on the rifle as he carefully levered a cartridge into the chamber and let the hammer down to half-cock.

"Me, I fill op pots, mebbe, not just wash 'em op. I go keel a deer, by Gar!" he mumbled.

It was an unusual duty for a cook to take upon himself, to hunt for meat. Suds, with a puzzled crease between his eyes, watched Frenchy trudge out of camp. A few moments later, he and Lila rode off, headed toward a western ridge that Larkin had told them to comb for strays.

The ex-cook's brow was still furrowed.

"I never did go prowlin' with a gun, my ownself," he declared. "It jest don't set right, somehow. Did yuh notice how that feller jumped like a frog after a bug when Moose mentioned them hoss tracks?"

"Those tracks, whose could they have been?" Lila wondered. "If the Circle Seven boys had been through there would have been signs of their camp at the corral."

Suds' worry wrinkles deepened as he saw a small band of Lazy L cows run from a bedding ground by the creek to the fringing timber. There were no yearling calves among them.

In silence he and the girl crossed the creek and with the warming sun

at their backs, followed a hogback that brought them out to the long, grassy ridge west of the Pass. Again they encountered cows—but no weaners at their heels.

There was an ominous dearth of young stock, as Moose McGee had forecast. They passed up the dodgy cows, for their job was to haze only yearlings to the corral ready for branding and driving down to the lower range. Without the drag of suckling calves, the cows and other old stock could winter in the high country.

They crossed to another hogback and had started another scouring search back toward camp when Suds called a sudden, hushed warning and reined back into some trees, beckoning the girl to follow.

PARTLY screened by branches, he pointed off across a grassy swale to a lofty rimrock. Lila's eyes followed the direction he indicated and presently caught the glint of a rifle barrel.

"It's Frenchy," Suds told her in a low, tense voice. "Also, if yuh look real close, yuh'll see five deer feedin' in that flat, not more'n two hundred yards below him."

The girl lowered her gaze and made out the nervous, shadowy movement of the deer—an antlered buck, two does and two half-grown fawns.

"It's easy range," she whispered, leaning toward the watching Suds. "Why doesn't he shoot?"

The other answered without turning.

"Because," he gritted, "Frenchy ain't huntin' deer meat. No sirree. He ain't watchin' 'em. He's got his eyes peeled yonder, beyond the ridge."

"What do you think—"

Suds, mouthline grim under his ragged mustache, swung his horse farther back into the trees. "I aim to find out," he interrupted. "No, don't foller. I'm makin' this look-see alone."

Suds might as well have saved his breath, which was coming now fast and excited. As he climbed toward the ridge, the anxious girl trailed close behind him.

Nearing the top, they dismounted and dropped their reins. They made the remainder of the distance to the crest afoot, keeping a tumbled outcropping of rocks between them and the rimrock where Frenchy was stationed. At the top they halted, panting, beside a boulder. Below was a rolling wooded country, reaching for miles in the direction of the Powder Creek watershed. Toward the flat, sage-green sheep range, where Frenchy had lately been employed.

In the middle distance, where cedar and high pines grew densely, a thin, blue curl of smoke spiraled into the Indian summer sky.

Suds nodded gravely.

"Somethin' almighty funny," he stated. "Whatever it is, it's too much fer us two to chew off, without a gun between us. Reckon we better chase back to the pass and collect up yore Dad and the others."

Lila, without answering, returned with him to the horses. But instead of mounting, she leaned against the saddle, hand pressed to the region of her heart, a disturbing pallor on the smooth ivory of her skin. She smiled wanly up at Suds.

"Another touch of mountain sickness, I imagine," she told the unsuspecting Suds. "You go. I—I'll take it easy."

He rode back down through the trees. Once out of sight and hearing, Lila Larkin regained her vigor rapidly. She swung swiftly onto her horse, crossed the ridge, and descended at a reckless pace toward that thin, distant smoke.

She was convinced that Rex North

was camped down there. Though the act warred with her sense of loyalty to her father, she was determined to warn the mysterious young puncher of his impending danger. Despite his suspicious movements, she had an intuitive belief in his innocence, insofar as the loss of the Lazy L calves was concerned.

She rode for about an hour. Through crowding timber and undergrowth she suddenly burst into a small, open meadow—and her heart chilled at the scene that confronted her.

THE meadow yas filled with Lazy L yearlings, close-herded on the ripened grass. Two men squatted by a dying fire, less than a hundred yards from her. They leaped up at her unheralded appearance. Before she could recover from the shock of the unexpected discovery, they were beside her, six-guns drawn.

The older man, shad-eyed, unshaven and coarse-mouthed, seized her bridle. "Who in blazes are yuh? And where—" he began excitedly.

"Larkin's gal!" the other interrupted with an oath. "It means the Lazy L outfit's started on their roundup, Monk!"

"Where's the rest?" Monk blazed at her, his sunken eyes exploring the vicinity apprehensively.

"I—I'm alone," she told him. She regretted the words as soon as she uttered them. For the flat, expressionless eyes lost their fear. Monk's shapeless mouth twisted and he raised a hand, calling out to the riders who hemmed in the feeding yearlings:

"It's all right, boys! The filly mosied in by her lonesome!"

He jerked roughly on the bridle. At the fire he ordered Lila to the ground.

"What fool notion brung yuh here?" he demanded.

"The fire—" she began. She bit the words off, but not soon enough. The other man, cursing, began heaping earth on the embers.

"I told yuh, Monk! The wind, it died down here. We oughta made cold camp. This fire, it was a dead giveaway!"

Monk's emotionless eyes surveyed the girl coldly from head to foot. "Oh, I don't know," he declared with an evil, one-sided grin. "If it comes to a showdown with Larkin's crowd, we got her fer a ace in the hole."

"Meanin'—what?"

"They ain't molestin' us none. So long as we got her."

"But how in hell'll Larkin know?"

"Yuh're tellin' him, Dusty. Better git started. Tell Larkin that soon's we git these yearlings to Powder Cr—that is, to where we're headed, we'll turn her loose. That is, if he don't foller or make no trouble."

"Not by a damn sight! I ain't pokin' *my* head in any Lazy L noose thataway."

"Don't be a fool! Keep outa sight o' the old man, hisself! Leave yore message with McGee. And ask Moose why he started the roundup without informin' us. He promised to delay till—"

Dusty made an angry warning movement to silence Monk. But Lila was hardly aware of the words that implicated her father's foreman. Her eyes were searching the fringes of the meadow, where three herders hemmed in the two-three hundred restless calves.

Rex North was not among them. This discovery brought a wave of relief in which she was oblivious to her own danger. But Windy's next words brought quick alarm.

"There's a better way to handle this, Monk. They don't know where the gal strayed off to. If she don't show up, they'll be too damn busy searchin' fer her to trail us." He

grabbed Lila by the arm and forced her, with a twist, to sit down. "Git the herd movin', Monk. Leave the rest to me."

Monk rubbed his stubby chin. "But if they find her later on—" he argued uncertainly.

Dusty scooped a final heap of mellow, rockless dirt onto the fire.

"Nice diggin' ground here," he remarked complacently. "I don't think they'd bother to look under camp ashes, not even if they found 'em." The girl's horrified eyes were fixed on him as he went about his sinister task with a slab of sharp-edged rock. "Git goin', Monk," he repeated. "I'll be along, pronto. Alone, savvy?"

Monk's face twisted in that slow, cunning grin. "I plumb admire yore nerve, Dusty."

"Huh, it wouldn't 'a' been necessary if yuh hadn't blabbed that about Moose McGee!" grunted the other as he dug.

He had a hollow trench excavated by the time Monk and the others had the herd in motion. He sat down and calmly started a cigarette, one watchful eye slanted on the prisoner. Lila's pallor had increased, but her grey eyes were steady.

Her heart was pounding so that the pulse throbbed in her throat. As soon as the others were well away from the meadow, she knew that this murderous rustler would calmly carry out his threat.

A swift, crushing blow and it would be over. It was useless, she knew, to plead for mercy. And a cry in this lonely wilderness would be futile. If she made a dash for escape, he could shoot her down before she had gone three steps.

Even now, confronted with a gruesome death, the thought that had brought her to this fateful spot returned to Lila.

Dusty plucked a stray ember from the earth-heaped fire and touched it to his cigarette. There was an ominous finality as he rose to his feet, standing in front of her, one hand moving toward his weighted holster.

"Wait!" she said breathlessly. "I want to ask you this: What part in this miserable affair did—did Rex North have?"

Dusty had his six-gun drawn, ready for the deadly descending smash of the heavy barrel. But at mention of the young puncher's name, his jaw sagged and the cigarette dangled from his parted lips. He thrust his face forward, whites of the eyeballs showing in sudden fear.

"Rex North?" he croaked. "What for'd yuh mention Rex North?"

At that instant, there was a slight sound in the timber. The crackling of brittle deadwood under hoofs, the brush of branches on leather.

DUSTY straightened, whirled. As swiftly, Lila leaped for his gun arm, gripping it with a desperate strength. He snarled an oath and tried to jerk free.

Then across the thin dust haze that marked the recent passing of the herd, a gun spoke. Lila felt Dusty's muscles jerk under her clinging fingers. He uttered an agonized sound and slowly crumpled to his knees. She jerked the six-gun out of his hand.

He made a grab for it, missed, and toppled over on his face. He drew a deep, shuddering sigh, then went limp. A wisp of cigarette smoke trickled up past the stubble of his cheek.

The courage that had borne Lila Larkin through the crisis seeped from her now, leaving her weak and shaken. She turned in the direction from where the shot of deliverance had come, but the whole world reeled before her eyes, blurring the crowded trunks. She saw nothing. But was it the wild tumult of her

blood or the sound of someone riding off through the trees that she heard?

She reeled to her horse and clung to it for a moment before she was able to mount. She gave one quick glance at the loathsome Dusty, then went back and rolled the body into the grave that he had scooped out for her. She thrust loose dirt and ashes over it with her boots.

A smolder of smoke lifted again. It would be a beacon for her father and the others when they came, grim and trouble-bent.

The thought of more bloodshed revolted her and she decided abruptly to meet them, to head them off. In her overwrought state, the loss of the yearlings meant little beside the dangers of a gun fight with Monk and the three other rustlers.

She went to her horse again and swung to saddle, Dusty's six-gun tucked in at her belt. She had gone but a short distance when she heard faint blatting of the calves behind her, to the west. Lila knew the sound of range creatures like any cowboy. Something had happened to startle them.

SHE reined in, turned. Her nerves leaped to the ragged echo of a gunshot, then another, followed by a scattered volley. As it died away came the faint pound of milling hoofs, a long, quavering shout, then one more shot.

Had the Lazy L come so soon? Had they clashed with the rustlers? What was the outcome? The uncertainty filled her with terror.

The stampeding hoofs were nearer. The yearlings were coming back toward the meadow. Lila spurred her horse back toward that dreaded spot but she did not emerge into the open. She halted back in the shadowy undergrowth, and watched the first of the calves break into the grassy expanse.

Panting from their crazed dash, they lingered there, massing in a nervous circle. Presently a rider burst into view, and a choked cry rose to Lila's throat. Rex North! He was herding the yearlings, circling along the far edge of the trees, working them into a packed, milling bunch.

What did it mean? Had he, after all, been a member of that thieving band?

As she watched, the young puncher drew his gun and began reloading it from his belt loops.

The truth dawned with a flash, then. The shot that had saved her from Dusty, the clamoring reports that followed—some of them, at least—had come from his swift, sure hand.

With a tiny, glad cry Lila plunged through the screening growth toward the meadow. But in that moment that she came from the trees, there was a racing pound of hoofs off to the left. She wheeled around and saw the Lazy L riders, led by the wrathful Moose McGee, pour into the open.

The jaded calves scattered again. Young North looked up in startled wonderment from his reloading. Lila saw her father.

"Drop it, North!" he roared. "We have got yuh!"

McGee did not wait. His six-shooter flashed from its holster, slammed down to a level aim and blasted with a billow of smoke.

Rex North jerked erect and swayed in his saddle. His gun fell from his hand and he gripped his right arm.

Moose McGee, riding hard, was almost on the young puncher now. His weapon was aimed for a final killing shot. Then Lila's frantic fingers nimbly plucked the six-gun from her belt, and it leaped and roared.

Providence, rather than skill, guided her aim. Moose McGee's

thick shoulders hunched up level with his ears. He hauled on his reins, grabbing for his saddle horn as he swayed forward. His mouth gaped wide open as his six-shooter dangled from a finger caught in the trigger guard, and he pressed the weighted hand to his middle.

Lem Larkin drew his horse in, rearing and pawing; and his men jerked around toward that unexpected gun sound. McGee started to dismount. He collapsed as his feet touched the ground, and huddled over, groaning.

Young North stepped down and recovered his gun with his left hand. When he straightened, the Lazy L had him surrounded and covered.

"Don't shoot, anybody!" Lila screamed. She made toward her father at a dashing run, smoke streaming thinly from the six-gun she still gripped against her. She drew up beside him with an anguished sob. He leaned out and gingerly plucked the weapon from her. He was white-lipped now, and looked at her with tragic accusation.

"Honey, git a grip on yoreself. This crooked young galoot, he'll suffer fer forcin' yuh into this!"

"B-but he didn't! He's innocent. Put up your guns, everybody, please. Listen! If you'll just listen—"

Her voice failed her. They were listening, all of them, except Suds. Strangely enough, he was the calmest man among them. He slid from leather, bent over the suffering foreman, and jerked his shirt open in the front. He made a swift, examination, then stood up and faced Larkin.

"She jest slowed him up fer a while, boss. He ought to be blamed glad. Ain't every man who gits his belly-fat removed so neat." His hands made an unconscious gesture to his waist. "Dang it all, if I only had some floursack bandage—"

The Lazy L punchers, hard-faced and silent, encircled young North, whose fingers were reddening as he gripped his wounded arm.

"Suppose yuh let a man make some talk," he said. "Jest to prove to yuh sudden, where I stand. Little Johnny Roberts, who was murdered at Dry Falls, was my pardner, my best friend." He halted as a catch came in his voice. He looked at Moose McGee, who was sitting up now and staring at him. Then he turned to Lila. "I reckon yuh know yuh got the right man, little gal. The last one o' the Monk Clawson crowd that's left—there he is. And when I git done talkin', he'll wish yore slug had gone deeper."

MINUTES later, when Suds had bound McGee's wound and was binding a piece of ripped shirt on North's bullet-gouged arm, the young puncher related his story to the amazed listeners.

"Jest before Johnny Roberts was killed, he wrote me a letter," he told them. "Said he had some purty powerful suspicions that the foreman o' this outfit was tied up with a range-raidin' outfit. Well, McGee musta got wind of it. Fer the next I heard Johnny'd been shot dead.

"I was on the Box-C, over beyond Powder Crick then. I up and quit. I come to the Lazy L an' got me Johnny's job, yuh remember. I did not give a whoop about yore cattle, Larkin, not then. I was set on findin' out who finished Johnny. I nosed around and I smelled a polecat. It was McGee. But I didn't have quite enough to go on."

"What for," interrupted Larkin, "did yuh vamoose for last night?"

"On account o' that new cook, Frenchy. He knowed me. He had seen me on the Box-C. If he saw an' recognized me, it'd be a dead giveaway, once McGee found out. So I lit out."

"What makes yuh so certain Frenchy woulda told McGee?" demanded Larkin.

"That's easy. That frog-faced pot rassler, he was in cahoots with the Monk Clawson bunch. Sort of a spy. Lugged messages around, back an' forth. That's why he come by the Lazy L that day—to bring Monk's orders for McGee to delay the roundup somehow till Monk an' the others raked the upper range clear of unbranded calves."

Marlin rifle. Miss Lila, she kin tell yuh all about that!"

All the way back to Gunsight Pass Suds lamented the end of his brief freedom from culinary routine. The others paid little attention to his plaint. For Frenchy might put up a fight.

Nearing the ridge, Suds and two others rode on ahead of the slow-moving herd of yearlings which the outlaws had succeeded in obligingly gathering up for them. Suds had a

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RIDIN' HOME

I'm a-ridin' on to Rawhide, a-headin' back fer home agin,
Ridin' hell-fer-leather to keep my promise true
To the gal I left behind me when I went out to roam agin—
I figgered I'd 'a' made my stake in 'bout a year or two.

O, Jane's a mighty pretty gal if ever waddie knew one,
I'd range the world forever if she'd be mine in the end;
Now I've struck it rich in Rio an' I'll gather up my true one
An' take her with me where the Western sky and blue sierras blend. . . .

—TEX MUMFORD.

Lem Larkin was beginning to believe now.

"Huh! No wonder McGee was so dead set against hirin' Frenchy! It'd plumb end his usefulness, that's plain enough."

Suds Soper listening with growing concern. He spoke up now.

"Boss, does that mean I gotta go back to peelin' spuds and singein' my pore ol' whiskers over a cook fire?"

"It shore does!" declared Larkin. "That is, if he ain't cleared out already!"

"Well, he ain't! I'm purty positive he's layin' fer this youngster, North! Across the sights o' yore weapon this time; the six-gun that Dusty had carried before Rex North's shot from the rim of the meadow ended his murderous career.

The two punchers returned to the herd late that afternoon. They brought a pleasant surprise.

"We found that frog cook in camp drunk as a hoot owl," they told Lem Larkin.

"Drunk?" yelped the Lazy L owner. "Did he sneak some likker along, after what I said?"

"Nope. But he shore did blot up about six bottles o' vanilly extract! Suds, he's got him hog-tied to a tree.

And he'll have supper on the fire when we hit camp. He feels mighty dismal, though, gittin' his old job back."

Over the ridge and down into the pass, the last of the yearling herd was secure by dark and ready for the morrow's branding. Rex North, his wounded arm in a sling, dismounted with a weary grin by the cook fire.

"Look here, old-timer," he told Suds, "suppose me an' you swap jobs."

The cook shot him a look of amazed unbelief.

"Yuh—yuh mean yuh'll take this pot wranglin' off my hands?" he blurted.

"Fer a spell. Till I sorta grow together. That is, if Lila stays in camp to help me."

The delighted Suds began unknotting the flour sack apron around his middle. He tossed it at young North with a whoop. Lila, close at the puncher's side, nodded her agreement to share the cook job. To share anything, including the future, with Rex North.

LEM LARKIN, up from the corral, saw them together. His face turned gravely thoughtful. But he didn't seem altogether displeased.

"Oh, well, thunderation!" he told himself. "I'll be needin' a new foreman anyhow!"

IN NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

WOLVES OF THE RANGE

A Complete Novel of Gunsmoke and Love

By EUGENE A. CLANCY

—AND—

THE GREY RIDER

A Novelette of Prairie Justice

By ALAN M. EMLEY

Also Novelettes and Stories by Larry A. Harris, A. Leslie, Dabney Otis Collins and Many Others

When Danger Threatened, It Was Up to

The FIGHTING FOREMAN

By JACKSON COLE

Author of "Widow's Might," "Six-Gun Justice," etc.

RUSTLERS!" came the hoarse shout from outside the bunkhouse. "Come a-runnin'!"

There were curses and muttered exclamations from the Seven Bar A riders as they fumbled for their boots and fastened their gun-belts.

Wade Clinton was the first man ready. The lean young foreman of the spread reached the door in a jump and hurried out into the night. Shorty Dill, mounted, was holding the reins of a saddled horse.

"They got the north herd," said Shorty as Clinton swung into the kak. "Downed Steve Lanning first crack outa the bush. Drilled him plumb center. I figgered I better come an' git help, so I hightailed it fer the bunkhouse."

"Which way did they go?" asked Clinton.

"Headin' south toward the Border, looked like."

"Come on." Clinton started his horse at a gallop. "No use waitin' fer the boys—they'll foller. We'll hafter ride hell-fer-leather to catch up to them now."

They had not gone far when they heard the sound of a galloping horse behind them. Clinton glanced back over his shoulder. Even in the dim light of the stars he recognized the white horse that approached. There was no mistaking Ann Martin's "Queen."

"Wade! Shorty!" called the girl. "Wait! I'm going with you."

Clinton started to protest and then changed his mind. He knew the fiery temper of the boss' daughter too well to argue with her. There was too much of old Brimstone Martin's fighting spirit in the pretty blond girl's make-up for words to prove anything but futile.

"All right," Clinton grunted. "But we're headin' fer trouble."

"Uh-huh," Shorty nodded. "Sorta figgered that. There was 'bout twenty of them outlaws, seemed like to me."

"Never mind that," Ann laughed as she rode beside them. "Maybe we can give those rustlers something to think about until the rest of our outfit finds us."

They reached the spot where the herd had been bedded down for the night. The place was deserted, but a dead horse gave mute testimony to the battle that had raged there. Riding a little farther, they discovered the body of Steve Lanning. A bitter rage swept over Wade Clinton.

He had liked Steve. Lanning had been a top-hand, and now he was dead. He had died loyally, fighting for the outfit, with his boots on and a six-gun roaring in his hand.

It was not the first time during the past few months that rustlers had made ruthless night raids on the

surrounding ranches. The Bar A had fared better than their neighboring spreads, but now their turn had come and they were ready and willing to fight.

The two men and the girl headed south. Dawn found them riding through rocky country. As they approached a group of huge boulders, a gun roared. Shorty slid out of the saddle, landing in a motionless heap on the hard ground. His horse uttered a snort of terror and bolted away.

"Look out, Ann!" yelled Clinton.

He swerved his horse so that he was in front of the girl, protecting her from the hidden marksman. Again the hidden rifle blazed. Ann screamed as she saw Clinton's horse go down. But the foreman had leaped out of the saddle as he felt the horse start to fall. He landed on his feet, hand streaking for the heavy Colt on his hip.

Ann had ridden her horse back behind a big rock, out of range. Her heart leaped as she heard Clinton's gun roar, and she smiled tremulously as he came running back to her.

"There's two men hidden behind the rocks," he said. "We gotta git outa here, pronto. Yore hoss carry double?"

"Yes," said Ann. "Climb up."

Clinton swung up on the white horse, behind her. They circled around the rocks, heading for the mouth of the canyon beyond.

"If we kin git into Arrow Head Canyon, we may be able to fight 'em off until the boys git here," said Clinton.

A bullet whistled by their heads, but they ducked low and urged the horse to greater speed. They reached the mouth of the canyon safely and galloped through the narrow entrance.

"Look!" exclaimed Ann, pointing to the left. "There's a cave up there. If we can get to it, we'll be pretty well protected."

"Right." Clinton dropped off the horse. "Give me that rifle in yore saddle boot."

He took the gun she handed him, and turned back to face the canyon entrance. Just as he swung around, a rifle roared. He staggered and nearly fell as a bullet caught him in the chest above his heart.

"Wade!" cried Ann. "You're wounded, Wade—"

"It ain't bad," he murmured. "Hit pretty high up. Don't worry, Ann."

She had swung out of the saddle and was rushing toward him. The rifle roared as Wade caught a glimpse of a man at the canyon entrance. The figure ducked out of sight.

"WE'VE got to get help in a hurry," said Ann, as she saw Wade stagger. "The boys won't know just where we are unless they hear the sounds of the shooting."

"Reckon not." Clinton put his hand to his chest, and when he took his fingers away they were covered with blood. "Reckon I can't keep goin' very long."

He leaned against the white horse. Ann uttered an exclamation as she gazed at the animal.

"That's it!" she exclaimed. "We'll let Queen loose. She always returns to the ranch when I do that."

"All right."

Clinton rubbed his bloodstained fingers over the flank of the white horse. Swiftly Ann unfastened the animal's bridle—and then gave Queen a hard slap. The mare started galloping toward the mouth of the canyon. Weakly Clinton raised the rifle as he saw a man leap out and try to catch the horse. The man went down as the rifle flamed, and Queen bolted through the canyon entrance.

Slowly Clinton and Ann began moving back toward the cave on the cliff. Using the scattered rocks as protection, they finally made it. The

climb up to the cave proved difficult, even though the girl aided Clinton as much as possible.

"Looks like I'm about through," he said. "Shore hope the boys git here soon."

Ann glanced down. She could see the herd at the far end of the canyon, and there was a group of men with the cattle.

"There's the herd, Wade," she said excitedly. "They must use this canyon for a hideout until they have time to drive the cattle across the Border."

"They've seen us," exclaimed Wade. "Somebody's comin' up the cliff."

He turned, raised the rifle slowly and painfully. He fired once—and then lowered the gun.

Ann had drawn her Colt—and she fired as Clinton turned to her, the smoking rifle in one hand, the other hand pressed against his chest where blood streamed down.

"Wade!" There was fright in Ann's tone as she saw him sway and then crumple beside her. "Wade, darling!"

"Nice to hear yuh say that," he muttered as she knelt beside him. "Been hopin' fer a long time yuh might feel thataway." He closed his eyes—fainted dead away.

From below there suddenly came the sound of rapid gunfire. A vast feeling of relief swept over Ann as she looked down and saw that the Bar A men had arrived and were fighting it out with the rustlers. The battle was fast and furious—not more than fifteen minutes had passed when it was all over and the triumphant waddies had cleaned up. Old Brimstone Martin came puffing up the cliff to the cave, with two of his men behind him.

"Dad!" exclaimed Ann as he reached her. "Wade—he's hurt bad."

Martin and his men quickly examined the wounded foreman. Finally the owner of the Bar A spread stood up and smiled at his daughter.

"He's lost a lot o' blood," said Martin. "But I reckon he'll live. We'll take him to town to the doctor."

"How did you know where to find us?" demanded Ann. "Did you hear the sound of the shooting?"

"No." The old rancher shook his head. "But we caught yore hoss headin' back fer the spread. When we saw the head of an arrow in blood on Queen's flank we figured yuh must be in Arrowhead Canyon, so we came here."

"Arrow on Queen," said Ann slowly. "Why, Wade must have done that. Wasn't that smart of him!"

"Shore he's smart," old Brimstone grinned. "If he wasn't he wouldn't be my foreman—an' mebbe my son-in-law."

Hombres and Hombresses! Now Is the Time to Join That Grand Outfit of Folks from Everywheres—

THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB

NO DUES—NO FEES—EVERYBODY'S WELCOME

There's a Coupon for Your Convenience on Page 139

Branding Fire Song Book

By "TEX" BROWN

FOLKS, maybe you know the answer to this one. But to tell you the truth I don't. How comes it that all the young folks out on the plains was so tragic in their songs?

I've tried to figure that one out for a long time, but I ain't been able to quite get the idea. I don't mean that it was only the folks out west that had so many tears in their tunes during them times, however. If you look through the city tunes you'll find the same thing.

Maybe it was just because folks was more romantic than they are now. That might be the answer, but then again it may not. It must be that folks is just as romantic as ever these days but just expresses it different. Anyway, take your pick of the reasons, but the facts remains the same.

She Shore Took Her Love Seriously

Take a look at this girl that lived on the plains. She shore took her love seriously according to the words of the song. We sing these sad songs now and get a laugh out of them, but in those days they didn't get a laugh. They could cloud up and cry over one of these tragic tunes quicker'n you could say Llano Estacado. The gal that could cry over one of them tunes then has a daughter that would just give one look at the cowpoke in the song and say, "Scram, Utsnay, I gotta new boy friend."

But just in case you still think that these tragedies was confined to the cow country I'll tell you a little something I learned about this song.

I've been hearing it sung nearly forty years like it's written here across the page. I supposed some cowboy wrote it, or maybe some ranch girl whose sweetheart had left her and failed to come back.

But just recently I was looking up some old English folk ballads that dates back fifty or a hundred years, and some of them longer. They was right pretty and right sad, and the whole theme of them all was about people dying for love.

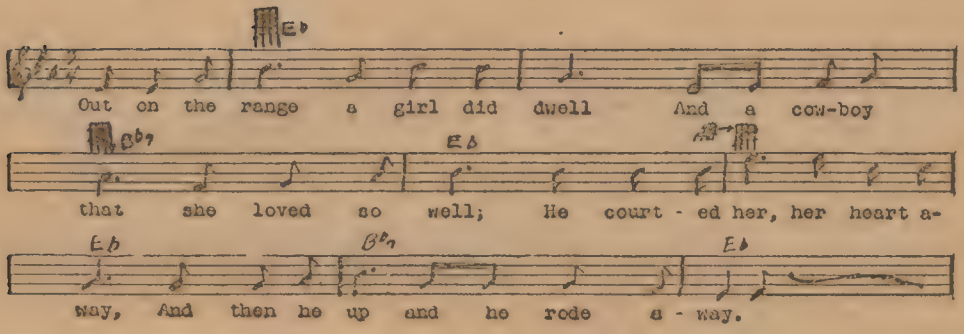
But that wasn't all I learned about things. I was picking out some of those old tunes on my guitar just to see how they sounded, when I run up against one about a gal in London getting heart-broke about a butcher's boy. It was pretty sad and sloppy and I'd thought I'd see how it went.

It Sounded Kinda Familiar

So I picked it off on the music box, then I perked up my ears and tried it again. It sounded kinda familiar. So I got out my big collection of cowpoke tunes that I've been a-collectin' for about twenty years, and shore enough, the cowpoke tune was the old butcher's boy tune just dressed up in a pair of chaps and a few Mexican or Texas modifications.

Then, here's a tune that was born across the sea, and maybe came over on the Mayflower, migrated west and became a cowboy song. I hope you like it and don't hold no grudge against it because it is a bleedin' Henglishman a few generations back. You wouldn't recognize the old chappie now, nohow. So tune up and hit her a lick.

LOVE ON THE PLAINS



2

She went upstairs to go to bed, and nothing to her mother said.
But mother said you're acting queer, what is the trouble daughter dear?

3

Oh mother dear, you need not know the pain, sorrow, grief and woe,
Give me a chair and sit me down, with pen and ink to write words down.

4

"Oh dig my grave both wide and deep and place a tombstone at my feet,
And on my breast please place a dove, to signify I died of love."

5

And when her dad came riding home, he asked where had his daughter gone.
He went upstairs, the door he broke, and found her hanging by a rope.

6

He took his knife and cut her down, and in her bosom this note he found:
"Girls, save yourselves from all love's pains, don't love a man who rides
the plains."

White Feathers

By BERNARD BRESLAUER

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CHAPTER I

A New Foreman

HANK SUMNER stood before the owner of the Circle Noose spread, awkwardly twisting his hat in his big hands. His face was sober, his eyes downcast.

"So you, too, have come for your white feather," Ann Jefferson said.

The foreman's face grew flushed, he raised his eyes from the ground to the white wisp she held in her hand.

"Miss Ann," he said, "I rode fer yore dad long an' faithful. I traveled with him through dust an' drought. In time o' cow-sickness I near forgot what sleep was like. When he died he said to me: 'Ride fer my daughter like yuh rode fer me. Help her to keep the spread goin' till the right man comes along fer her to lose her heart to. We've got a good spread here at last. The

Larry Barclay Puts His Ready Six-Guns

A Complete Novelette of Cow Country Romance

Eyes blazing, Ann Jefferson drew her gun

good Lord watered it with a river that makes it a Garden of Eden fer steers'—"

"Steers need men to look after them," the girl interrupted.

"An' men"—the foreman's voice was low with regret at what he had

at the Service of a Troubled Range Girl!

to say—"men need a *man* to look after *them*."

It was the girl's turn to flush. Her blue eyes shot sparks. Imperious, angry, the color high in her cheeks, she looked even prettier than ever before.

"Is it my fault my father had a daughter instead of a son?" she flashed.

"AN' is it men's fault that they value their lives?" the foreman retorted quietly. "Men that work fer chuck an' wage will risk so much an' no more. I know it's been hard fer yuh to see the men leavin' one by one. But don't forget that before the stampede away from this spread started, three o' the boys was bushwhacked at different times, mysterious-like. An' after that it was a bullet comin' out o' nowhar an' drillin' the crown of a hat, or maybe killin' a man's favorite hoss. An' do yuh think it was easy fer them men, even at that, to come to yuh an' say, 'Miss Ann, life ain't healthy on this spread; I've got to travel on'? Yuh got bitter after a while, fer which I'm not blamin' yuh. Yuh got yoreself some white feathers. An' when a man would come to yuh, yuh would make him stand before yuh while yuh pinned a white feather on him.

"Mebbe yuh thought that would stop 'em. It didn't. Yuh didn't know that I rode with each o' them to the limit o' the spread. Each o' those men, ridin' hell-bent, was cryin'. Yes, Miss Ann, cryin'. An' they wouldn't take off them feathers till they'd got off yore land. I see yuh've got two feathers left, one fer me an' one, I reckon, fer the China boy cook—"

Ann Jefferson's eyes were suspiciously moist. Sadly she shook her head.

"One for you," she admitted in a low voice. "The other—for me."

"What do yuh mean?"

"Ah Sing will leave because there is no more work for him. When he does, I'll be alone. Who knows? I may decide to leave myself, after selling off as much as I can. When that happens I'll pin the last white feather on Ann Jefferson."

Hank Sumner hesitated an instant, then shook his head slowly, regretfully.

"Miss Ann," he said, "do you see this hat? Many's the time I've filled it from a trickle an' watered my hoss with it. It won't hold water any more, Miss Ann. Yesterday some unseen gent blew daylight through its crown. A little lower down an' today I'd not be here but somewhere up there in the hot sky, in the bellies o' buzzards. I'm pow'ful sorry, Miss Ann. I've come fer my white feather."

Without another word, with trembling fingers, the girl fastened the white feather to the foreman's shirt. Hank Sumner's face worked as she did; his Adam's apple jerked convulsively. The girl's hands dropped to her sides. The foreman's head was bowed for an instant, as he gazed down at the emblem that seemed to burn his chest.

"Good-by, Miss Ann," he choked.

A minute later she heard the beat of his horse's hoofs. She sank down upon the lower step of the ranch-house and buried her face in her hands.

The China boy cook came around from the back. For an instant he stood regarding his mistress curiously, then said:

"Me all packed, Missy. Me go, too, now."

She looked up listlessly. "Good-by, Ah Sing."

"Good-by, Missy."

He was gone, quickly, noiselessly, riding the same burro on which he had come. The owner of the Circle Noose spread continued to sit on the

lower step of the porch, her face again buried in her hands.

"Beg pardon, Miss, but I'd like to see the owner o' this spread."

The request came from a man who had just dismounted from a big roan horse. Horse and man were prairie-branded and looked done in. The man was young but the light of far places in his eyes made him look older.

His face was deeply bronzed. The sun seemed to have worked its way clear down to the bone. There was about him a certain air of wildness, as though he were a man not used to living long in towns. Even the clothes he wore were not town-made clothes but buckskins, which the rifle slung in his saddle had probably won for him. His feet were not shod with boots but with moccasins. His saddle had no stirrups, indicating that he rode Indian fashion. His eyes were blue and deceptively gentle.

Ann Jefferson had been so deeply sunk in despair and loneliness that she had not heard the stranger ride up. She lifted her head, forgetting that her face was tear-stained. With something of a shock she beheld that there was still a *man* on her spread. She rose, and with a strange bitterness in her voice, asked: "What do you want?"

The stranger, whose eyes had kindled with admiration as soon as he had seen her face, repeated his request.

"*I* own it," was the response.

The stranger made the mistake of laughing in disbelief. It was the last straw for Ann Jefferson. Before she realized what she was doing she had slapped the stranger's face and then —to his utter amazement—had burst into tears.

He was all the more astounded when she cried out passionately: "I hate you! I hate all men!"

"But, Miss," he said in a puzzled way while he gently rubbed his reddened cheek, "yuh don't know me from Adam. Beggin' yore pardon, I've got to say that I'm plumb flabbergasted. Is this the custom o' the range, slappin' strangers thataway? Yuh asked me what I wanted. Well, to put it plain, I'm hungry—I'm ornery, dodgasted hungry. But seein' as how yuh welcome strangers in these parts, I reckon I kin work out a meal elsewhere."

As he talked his eyes had been roving over the house and outbuildings, over the spreading rangeland, looking for signs of life maybe. He saw none and was puzzled. But it was the girl who was evidently puzzling him most of all. There was something behind that slap and behind those tears, something that was probably worth knowing.

Ann Jefferson was angry with herself for having wept before this tall Indian-like stranger. The rangeland law of hospitality fought with her pride. It was about the only law that had ever come into those parts.

SHE said, her voice still trembling a little, "You can have your meal, stranger. You don't have to work it out. But when you're through, you'll travel on. This spread doesn't want men on it. They're not fit for it. Go into the kitchen and get yourself some food."

He must have eaten quickly for he was soon out again, rolling a cigarette. He caught sight of the girl moving toward the stables. When he overtook her he said: "Things look kind o' quiet around here."

"I like them quiet."

"Thanks for the meal."

She made no answer.

"Where's yore help?" he asked her pointblank. "What's happened here? How come yuh're all alone?"

"Strangers shouldn't ask so many questions," she said.

Suddenly she felt herself being seized by the shoulders and shaken as though she were an unruly child. She looked up into eyes no longer gentle. He was gripping her strongly but taking care not to hurt her. His words crackled.

"I'll give yuh just ten seconds to start tellin' me what's back of all this, an' if at the end of those ten seconds yuh haven't started, I'll throw yuh across my knee an' give yuh the spankin' yuh deserve—fer that slap and on general principles. Quick now!"

He was actually getting ready to make good his threat when she cried wildly, "Let go of me! I'll tell you!"

She flung the story like a hot blast in his face. When she had finished she flashed: "And now—get out!"

He looked at her for an instant in silence, as though studying her.

"Yuh know," he said with a smile, yuh're right pretty when yuh're mad —an' even when yuh're not."

"Get out!" she repeated.

He shook his head.

"I'm stayin'. Yuh need a man around this place. Mebbe yuh need a man fer that one white feather yuh've got left—"

He broke off abruptly. She had drawn a gun from the belt around her slim waist and was pointing it at him.

"Get out!" she repeated once more. The gesture was in strange contrast to her eyes, which were winking rapidly to keep back another rush of tears. He took a step toward her. The revolver came up quickly, menacingly.

"Shoot," he said softly. "Yuh got a legal right to do it. I'm on yore land, yuh don't want me on it, yuh ordered me off, I didn't go. So yuh kin shoot with a clear conscience." He came clear up to the revolver's muzzle. She holstered the gun abruptly. He thought he detected the ghost of a smile playing about her lips.

"You're hired," she said. "What wages do you expect to get?"

"None," was the surprising answer.

"Maybe that's all you're worth," she said dryly, successfully concealing her astonishment. "You can start by cleaning out the stables."

He began to see the reason for the smile. "Yes, ma'am," he said meekly.

"What's your name?"

"Lawrence Barclay, ma'am—Larry for short. What's yores?"

"Ann Jefferson."

"Proud to make yore acquaintance, Ann—I mean ma'am. But if it's all the same to you, I'll let the stable cleanin' wait. Yuh see, since I'm the only hired hand on this spread, I've sort o' become top-hand an' foreman automatically. Naturally I take orders from the foreman, the same bein' myself. An' the foreman, he sez, sez he to me: never mind the stables, Larry. Yuh got somethin' more important to do."

CHAPTER II

The Last Feather

HE pulled a blanket off a rack and went outside. She followed him, anger and a strange new emotion struggling inside her. She watched him curiously as he built a fire. When it was well under way he tented it with the blanket. Smoke accumulated beneath the covering. He raised it with a practised gesture and quickly covered it again. The smoke that had been imprisoned rose in a great ball to the sky.

Feminine curiosity got the better of her pride. "What do you think you're doing?" she asked.

"Ma'am," he said, "a spread is no good without hands to work it. This

spread has got to have some hands. What I'm doin', ma'am, is gettin' yuh some."

Again and again he spilled the smoke out of the blanket and sent it skyward. She watched him with a growing fear. She understood now what he was doing—using the ancient Indian system of sending messages, something she had never seen outside school books.

But to whom was he signaling? What kind of men would that signal bring in? Was he their leader? There was something wild about him. Maybe he had sized up her situation and seen how easily he could profit by it, how easily he could jump her range and stock for himself.

He put out the fire. "They'll be here by sundown," he said with simple confidence. "They weren't so far off when I left them this mornin'."

"Who do you mean when you say 'they'?"

"Say, you sound a mite scared. Just some o' my boys, drivin' up ten thousand head from Old Mexico. They won't all come. Fifteen or so, mebbe. I happen to be in the same business as you, ma'am. Got my spread beyond the Pecos—long ways from here."

"What made you leave them?"

"Just happened to remember that an old friend o' my father's used to be a puncher in these parts. Thought I'd look him up. Didn't know what outfit he was with, but reckoned I could find it. Name o' Hank Sumner."

"He was my foreman," Ann Jefferson said in a low voice.

Larry Barclay whistled. "My father used to tell me about his old side-kick, Hank. So that's one o' the men yuh pinned a white feather on. Ma'am, yuh should have known better than that."

"I'm sorry I did it—now."

"Folks is generally sorry about such things when it's too late. Still, it shows yuh got a human streak in yuh after all—"

Her face changed with a new suspicion. How did she know that he wasn't lying? How did she know that it wasn't this very stranger who had blown daylight through her foreman's hat?

"Looks like we're gettin' some company," he said.

SHE followed his gaze. "Rush Blanton and his foreman, Tom Legree!" A sudden exclamation broke from her. "What's today's date?"

"August fifteenth. Why?"

"What time is it?"

He looked up at the sun. "Jest about noon," he said, puzzled by these seemingly meaningless questions. "Why this interest in the time?"

"You may not know it," she said, "but if you've given me the right time, you're working for Rush Blanton now. It's mortgage-interest day. Blanton has come to collect—three hundred head. Look at the corrals. Do you see any steers about?"

"Nary a one."

"Hank Sumner was herding them in when he was shot at. They're scattered over the range now. Blanton has come to collect or foreclose."

Larry Barclay's eyes narrowed.

The two men had ridden up and dismounted.

"Good morning, Miss Ann," Blanton said. He was a tall heavy-set man in his late forties, a dominating type, with hard eyes and a ruthless mouth.

"Is it still morning, Mr. Blanton?" the girl answered.

"I'm sorry this is only a business visit, Miss Ann," Blanton said. "I suppose yuh know what day it is."

"August fifteenth—interest day—yes, I know. I'm sorry, Mr. Blanton, but I haven't got it."

"That's too bad," Blanton said regretfully, but a keen ear would have detected a note of insincerity in his voice. "You know the conditions. Foreclosure on non-payment of interest." Blanton, with apparent hesitation, drew a paper from his pocket.

"I know," Ann Jefferson answered in a lifeless voice. "I suppose there is nothing for me to do but sign."

BLANTON came close to her. The meaning of his bearing was now unmistakable.

"Yuh know yuh don't have to sign, Miss Ann—Ann," he said quickly, his voice low but vibrant. "You remember what I asked yuh last interest day. That offer still holds good. Think what it would mean, Ann. Yuh wouldn't have to worry about keeping this spread going any more. The whole range would be yores—this spread and all the rest. A girl like you shouldn't have had to go through all that trouble—yore hands leaving yuh—"

"Any idea who was responsible fer all that bushwhackin'?"

The question had come sharply from the lips of the tall, Indian-like stranger. Blanton turned violently, incensed at this rude interruption of his proposal of marriage.

"Who is this man?" he demanded.

"Larry Barclay," Ann Jefferson answered. "My new foreman."

"Foreman? Foreman of what?"

"Of the Circle Noose spread," Larry said quietly. "I beg yore pardon, ma'am, fer buttin' in this-away—"

"Then butt out!" Blanton snapped, turning back to the girl.

"I'm workin' fer the lady," Larry drawled. "She ain't discharged me yet, an' she ain't signed that paper, so I reckon I'm still foreman. That bein' so, I reckon I kin still talk fer her, 'less she says no. As I see it, yuh come to collect mortgage interest payment o' three hundred head. The lady is wrong when she says she ain't got 'em. She's got 'em all right. The only thing is, they ain't been rounded up. If yuh want yore interest, what's to stop yuh from goin' out an' collectin' it off the range? The lady has had trouble an' has been unable to round up the interest. Are yuh goin' to take advantage o' that fact, like a schemin' mealy-mouthed lawyer feller, to get her spread away from her?"

"Ann," Blanton's voice was dangerously calm, "is this man speakin' for you, or are yuh speaking for yoreself?"

"I always speak for myself!" the girl flashed. She wheeled toward Larry, a strange anger burning in her eyes—anger at this stranger who had presumed to come in and run her life for her, who had laid hands on her, who had placed her in the ignominious position of almost being spanked by him. "You said you had a spread of your own," she said hotly. "Go back and run it. I'll run mine myself. Do you understand? You're discharged!"

"I see," Larry said softly. "I sure made a mistake this mornin'. I should have spanked yuh like I threatened to." The next instant, swift as lightning, he had drawn both his guns. "None o' that!" he snapped. "Reach fer the sky, the both o' yuh! I reckoned that would fetch yuh, Blanton. Yes, I threatened to spank the lady this mornin'. She needed some sense spanked into her. But that was a matter between me an' her. Yuh may own this spread now, accordin' to the lawyers, but yuh don't own her—not yet anyway—"

The ways of women are strange. The next instant the girl had cried out: "I'm going to marry Mr. Blanton!"

"No, ma'am," Larry said quickly and positively.

"Are you crazy! What right have

you got to tell me what or what not to do?"

His answer was startling. "The right that's in my guns an' in my heart! I'd have to be half-blind not to see that yuh don't care a hoot for this hombre, that what yuh're doin' is to spite me! Women folks are shore queer but sometimes they're easy to read."

A slow blush rose from Ann Jefferson's blouse and spread over her throat and cheeks. Eyes blazing, she drew her gun.

"Once more," Larry cried, still covering the other two. "Yuh could not shoot this mornin'. See if yuh can shoot now!"

"Shoot!" Blanton roared at her furiously. "You've got a right to! He insulted you. He's trespassing. We'll bear witness to it!"

The ways of women are strange. Ann Jefferson lowered her gun. Perhaps the words of the wild stranger were echoing in her brain. "The right that's in my guns *and in my heart!*" Her own heart beat faster. "I hate him," she cried inwardly. But she did not believe herself.

"Git goin'," Larry ordered. "Git up on yore hosses an' ride."

"We'll be back," Blanton said, white with fury. "We'll be back with the sheriff. You'll be swinging from a tree limb before sundown!"

They were gone. Ann Jefferson and Larry Barclay looked at each other. Ann Jefferson spoke slowly. "Till my dying day I'll hate you," she said.

He came close to her. "I couldn't stand fer to see you makin' a mess o' yore life," he said with suppressed passion. "Yuh kin hate me as much as yuh like but yuh can't stop me from tellin' yuh now: I've been lookin' fer someone like yuh fer a long time. What's on my lung is on my tongue. If they ketch me an' hang me, the last word on my lips before the hemp shuts off my breath will be yore name. But never mind that now. It's plain enough that Blanton is behind all that bushwhackin' an' frightenin' off o' hands. I'm surprised yuh never suspected it."

"I did," she said quietly.

"An' still yuh were ready to marry him?"

"I wasn't—"

His face lit up with joy. "Yuh only said that woman-like," he cried. "Yuh couldn't stand my bossin' yuh."

THE color rose to her cheeks again but she did not answer.

"Ain't there no law at all in these parts?" he asked.

"None. Rush Blanton has made himself the law. What—what are we going to do?"

"'We,'" he cried. "You said 'we'!"

"I got you into this."

His face sobered. "I reckon I got myself into this."

"I'll take you up to Hawks Nest," she said quickly. "You can lie low there till your men come, and if the posse picks up your trail, there'll be some chance of your holding them off. Here there'll be none. I'll see you through this till your men arrive. Then—then we'll say good-by."

His face darkened. "I get it," he said. "It's jest a duty with yuh, nothin' else."

"We'd better get started," she said.

She felt herself suddenly hurled to the ground. At the same instant she heard a shot. Dazed, she lifted her head and saw Larry Barclay running low toward his horse. In a thrice he had freed his rifle. It was then, seeing the direction of his aim, that she saw the retreating forms of a horse and rider moving rapidly toward the western horizon. She saw the blue barrel of the rifle spurt

flame and smoke. She saw the horse and rider separate, the rider falling, the horse moving on. Larry Barclay came back to her.

"That looked like Legree," he said quietly. "He must have circled back to take a pot-shot at me. Blanton's orders, I reckon. Looks like they mean business. I've changed my mind about Hawks Nest. I'm not lettin' you in fer any o' this. I'll be ridin'."

The smell of powder smoke was pungent in her nostrils as with one hand he lifted her, bruised and shaken, to her feet. "You mean—you mean you're going away?" she asked.

He nodded, not looking at her.

"I knew it was too good to be true," she said bitterly. "It's not me that you're afraid will get hurt. One pot-shot—that's all it takes—that's all it takes to drive a man off this spread. That's all it took with the others, that's all it's taking with you. You, too, then. The last one, and the whitest—"

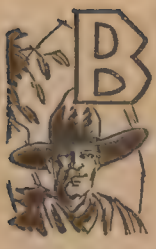
She saw his face grow pale beneath his tan, his lips open as though he were about to say something, then close again, tightly. She fastened her last white feather to his buckskin shirt.

"Now get out!" she said.

He mounted and rode off without uttering a further word.

CHAPTER III

Mortgage Money



BUT not long afterward, out on the plains, steers bearing the Circle Noose brand were startled by the appearance of a tall Indian-like rider, mounted on a big roan horse that seemed to know as much as its master. The straight tall figure galloped in and out among them, culling and assembling, now and then flashing over the plain after a frightened stray, his riata darting out ahead of him, his horse taking its stance at the proper time.

The rider was working with growing speed when he heard the rapid beat of horses' hoofs somewhere in his rear. Before he could turn a shot rang out. He tumbled off his horse and lay still.

The horseman who rode up and dismounted returned a smoking six-gun to its holster. He came within a few feet of the body when the body suddenly sat up, a gun in each of its hands.

"Raise 'em high,' said Larry, rising. "Surprised, hey? Well, yuh near got me—I heard yore bullet whistlin' past my ear. Figgered the best thing I could do was drop an' play possum, seein' as yuh had kind of a bead on me."

He broke off abruptly, his eyes fixed on something fastened to the other's shirt. "Jumpin' jiminy," he breathed.

The other saw the direction of his gaze and flushed. Then he, too, gave a start, noticing for the first time that his captor wore an emblem similar to his own. "I'll be a maverick's uncle," he said.

Larry holstered his guns. "I'll bet I know who you are," he said. "Yuh're Hank Sumner."

The other nodded wonderingly.

"I been looking fer yuh," Larry said. "I'm Lawrence Barclay."

"Not Ed Barclay's son?"

"The same."

"What in tarnation are yuh doin' here? An' wearin' that white feather to boot?"

Larry grinned. "Reckon we both got 'em in the same place. How come yuh haven't taken yores off? There's no law that says yuh got to keep wearin' it. She can't see yuh now."

"Why don't yuh take yores off?" Hank Sumner countered gravely.

"Well, to tell yuh the truth, I been so busy I plumb forgot I had it on."

Hank Sumner shook his head. "That ain't my reason. Thar's only one person I want to take this white feather off o' me, an' if she don't do it, I reckon I'll wear it till I die."

Larry's grin faded. "I see," he muttered. "Reckon yuh're right. I'll keep wearin' mine fer the same reason."

"Not that I haven't been busy, too. I been roundin' up stock fer her—"

"Me, too,"

"Shucks, I hadn't ought to have shot at yuh like that. But I thought yuh was rustlin', or mebbe yuh was one o' them men that had been doin' the bushwhackin' in these parts—"

"One o' Blanton's men, yuh mean?"

"I ain't sayin' because I don't know."

"But yuh suspect?"

"Shore—fer a long time. But there ain't no law hereabouts. There is a sheriff—Blanton owns him, lock, stock an' barrel."

"Blanton wants to marry Ann."

Hank Sumner pricked up his ears at this use of the first name. "How long yuh known Miss Jefferson?"

"Since this mornin'. I was ridin' along, lookin' fer yore outfit, an' gettin' hungrier by the minute, when I come on the Circle Noose. There was Ann—well anyway, I saw how things were an' I sent fer some o' my own boys to come an' help run things. Then along comes Blanton to collect his interest. There ain't no interest, so Ann says she's goin' to marry the varmint. I won't go into that part of it, but the upshot is that I kick Blanton an' his foreman off the spread. They threaten to bring back a posse an' lynch me, so Ann wants me to hole-out in a place she calls Hawks Nest. I don't want her to run the chance o' gettin' hurt so I tell her I'll be ridin' on. She thinks I lit out to save my own skin but I figure on bringin' in the three hundred head an' then takin' my chances with the sheriff's posse.

"Ann didn't sign the paper, so the spread is still hers. With the interest paid an' my boys there to take care o' things—cows *and* bushwhackers—Ann don't have to worry no more. So let's finish the job an' get back to our boss, even though she don't know we're still workin' fer her."

Which was why, that afternoon, Ann Jefferson heard a familiar bellowing, and coming out of the kitchen where she had been making herself some coffee, saw the posts of two of her corrals down to receive stock—saw Larry Barclay and Hank Sumner riding up to her.

"We've brought yore mortgage interest, ma'am," Larry said. "Hank Sumner an' me. We met out there an' found we was both aimin' at the same thing."

ANN was silent. Hank Sumner coughed with embarrassment. Her hand reached out toward his shirt. He stepped back.

"Not yet," he said. "We ain't seen this thing through yet."

"That goes fer me, too, ma'am," Larry said as she turned to him. He stroked the white feather. Suddenly he lifted his head and said sharply, "Somethin's comin'!" The others listened but could hear nothing. He nodded grimly. "Six—eight—mebbe ten men on horses. Can't be my boys. Must be the posse."

Ann found her voice at last. "Get into the house," she said quickly. "I'll refuse them admittance. It's still my house. Get in!" And when he still did not move she cried furiously, "You're working for me, aren't you? I'm giving you orders! Get inside!"

He went in, but not before he had taken his rifle and additional ammunition from his saddle.

Ann and Hank waited. The posse came on in a cloud of dust—Blanton, Sheriff Towers, and seven deputies. The sheriff dismounted, taking off his hat.

"Good afternoon, Miss Jefferson. We're lookin' fer yore new foreman, Lawrence Barclay."

"You're too late," she answered. "He's not here. He threw up the job and rode away a couple of hours ago. Mr. Blanton, I have your interest. You can take it away after giving me a receipt."

Blanton dismounted. He looked ugly but managed to conceal a part of the fury that was rising in him. "But the question I asked yuh this mornin'—yuh said—"

"I've changed my mind. A woman's privilege."

"The payment was due at noon today," he answered in level tones.

"Then why weren't you around to collect it?"

"I was around."

"Have you any witnesses to that?"

"Why, you know as well as I do that Tom Legree was with me—"

"Where's Legree now?"

"He didn't return—he—"

"Then you have no witness. For all Sheriff Towers knows, the payment was ready at noon today. Anyway, it's ready now. I'll trouble you for a receipt."

"And yuh'll git it, young lady," Blanton grated. "Here it is. This spread is yores for another three months. But in three days there won't be one of yore cows left on this range."

"Thanks for showing your hand so plainly."

"And what's more, yuh'll be minus a lover to boot! Not meaning me! Meaning Barclay! He's still here, Sheriff! If not," he ended triumphantly, "what's his horse doin' over there?"

Too late Ann saw that she had forgotten about the horse. "We swapped," she said desperately. "He traded his for one of mine."

"You're lying. Towers, we'll search the house."

"No you don't!" the girl cried. "There may not be much law on this range, but there's one right every rancher knows. If you enter my house I'll see that the news spreads from Panhandle to Pecos that Rush Blanton rode over the body of a woman to break into her home! Come, Hank. We're going in."

CHAPTER IV

Bullet Law

A MINUTE later, panting, Ann had shut and bolted the heavy door, and was leaning against it weakly. Larry Barclay looked at her. "At least they're still outside," she said.

"They're tough hombres, Ann—" He stopped abruptly when someone outside pounded on the door.

"Who is it?" Ann cried.

"Sheriff Towers!" came the answer. "I've got a writ of entry, signed by myself as peace officer!"

"You write fast, Sheriff Towers," Ann shouted back. "That writ is worthless. It's got to be signed by a judge. Take a fifty-mile ride to Platte, and see if you can get Judge Pound to sign it."

Larry shook his head. "It's no good, Ann. They won't stop fer writs. They mean to smash their way in an' git me. Blanton's got a brand new devil in him now. It's jealousy, an' a jealous man is a killer. Go upstairs, Ann—please. I'd try to get out by the back but I reckon they've got that covered too. Hank an' I will stand them off as long as we kin. If I see it's no use—well, I reckon I'll go out to them—go out shootin'. They'll not hang me. That's one thing I know. It'll

be lead or nothin'. I'll be glad fer one thing—I reckon yuh can guess what it is—I'll be glad I knowed yuh, even for this short time. I'll be glad I was able to help yuh, even though it wasn't much—"

"Larry!"

Hank Sumner looked the other way, remembering old man Jefferson's dying words, "till the right man comes along fer her to lose her heart to." He heard Larry say, "And now, Ann, go upstairs." He turned to see her shake her head. She was still in his arms. Then she broke from his grasp and ran upstairs, returning quickly with additional revolvers and ammunition. Larry and Hank had barricaded the doors. "You take the back, Hank," Larry said. "Down on yore knees, Ann—below sill-level."

She noticed something strange about his eyes. "Larry, what's the matter?"

"Nothin'," he said gruffly. "I jest took a peek out. One o' the deps shot my hoss a minute ago an' is usin' him fer a breastwork. He's in line with this window. Killed my hoss—in cold blood. Must have a heart blacker than the ace o' spades. I—I'm goin' to make it red fer him."

He picked his rifle up off the floor and raised his head carefully, keeping his body shielded. "Stay back," he said. "I'm goin' to stick out my hat so's he'll smash the pane. Too risky to try raisin' the window myself. I'll let him write his death warrant with his own bullets."

A moment later the pane was smashed, the hat riddled. Once more Larry raised and lowered his head. "Right," he breathed. Ann watched him fearfully. He seemed changed, far away, more like an Indian than ever. Drawing back to allow room for the barrel, he nestled the stock lovingly against his shoulder. "Be good, baby," he murmured, and Ann realized that he was talking to his rifle. "Be good, baby. Send yore messenger straight." His keen eyes narrowed, his body seemed carved out of stone, he even stopped breathing in order that there should be no motion left in him. And then he triggered, the reverberation filling the room. And outside, behind a dead horse, a man received a messenger—a leaden pellet between his eyes, which filled with blood as the life went out of them.

LARRY sank down, drawing breath. A hail of bullets burst against the house. Out in back they heard Hank Sumner going into action. Hank was firing slowly, carefully.

"They're playing for a chance hit," Larry muttered. "Listen. Someone's on the porch."

Ann listened, but could hear nothing. "How is it that your ears are so sharp?" she whispered. "You heard the posse before Hank and I did. You could almost tell how many were coming."

"Reckon I was born that way—good eyes an' good ears."

"But they're more than good—they seem more than human."

"I'm human all right. Lovin' yuh proves that. Don't it seem like we'd known each other for a long time, Ann?"

She nodded, but her face was anxious as she tried to hear the sound he had heard. "Hark!" he said. "Whoever he is, he's creepin'. Creepin' along the wall o' the porch toward this window. Must've come up at an angle where I couldn't spot him." Noiselessly he laid the rifle down and drew a revolver. "Get over in the corner," he warned. "This ain't gonna be any too pleasant to watch, let alone to do."

The seconds passed and seemed like hours. Then a revolver shot smashed the silence. Again Larry sank quietly down, his gun smoking. His face was mottled, as tanned faces

become when the blood leaves them. Out on the porch, directly beneath the window, a man had slumped down, his face a red powder-burnt smear. His chin had struck the outer sill as he sagged, so that Larry had had time to see what his bullet had done. "Two," he muttered. Again his face showed that he was listening for something.

"What is it?" Ann asked anxiously.

"Hank. Things sound too quiet where he is."

"Shall I go see?"

"All right—but keep low."

SHE crawled out of the room. When she reached the hall she stood up. But fear came to her when she approached the threshold of the room in which Hank had taken up his position. No sound came from it. She got down on her hands and knees again and crawled in. The first thing she saw was the figure of Hank in the corner, on his back, his head supported by the wall—apparently dead. But as she crawled closer she saw that he was still breathing. He was alive but unconscious.

The next instant she was startled by a voice coming from the window. "Don't make a sound," it said clearly and distinctly. Smothering a shriek, she turned her head. A revolver was being pointed at her by a hand and arm thrust through the window. "Be quiet," the voice continued, "and come out." She recognized the low voice of Sheriff Towers. "Yuh're under arrest for harboring a fugitive from justice," the voice went on. "Any resistance on yore part gives me the right to shoot, so come out quiet."

Her mind worked quickly. She knew what would happen if she raised an outcry. Larry would come before its echo had died away The knowledge that she was in danger would make him reckless. He would rush in and be shot down!

"All right," she whispered. "I'll come."

In the front room Larry waited, and even his keen ears were not keen enough to hear that whisper. His first knowledge of what had happened came from the outside. The shooting had mysteriously ceased. He heard the voice of Blanton roaring out his name. "Barclay—Barclay!"

He crept along the wall, away from the window, suspecting a ruse. "What do yuh want!" he shouted back.

"We want yuh to come out."

"If yuh want me, come an' git me!"

"I reckon we don't have to! We've got Ann Jefferson out here!"

Larry's heart turned over in him. "I don't believe yuh!" he shouted.

"No? Then we'll let her tell yuh herself!"

"It's true, Larry! I'm out here, with them!"

"Hank is wounded," her voice came again. "I came out at the point of a gun—"

The rest he couldn't make out. It was as though someone had clapped a hand over her mouth. He heard the bull-throated voice of Blanton roar:

"If yuh come out, Barclay, we'll see that no harm comes to her. But if yuh don't, you'll have a dead sweetheart, understand? We're bound to git yuh anyway, sooner or later, and we kin always say that you killed her. So the best thing for yuh to do, if yuh want to see Ann Jefferson alive, is to come out. And don't come out shootin', either. Come out unarmed. No shootin', understand? Because if yuh do, the promise of Ann Jefferson's safety is off. I'll give yuh two minutes by my watch."

Larry stood up. He had heard enough, more than enough, to under-

stand what was in back of Blanton's mind. Blanton wanted him to come out peaceably. For this purpose he held Ann Jefferson as a hostage. Blanton wanted him to come out peaceably because Blanton did not want to shoot him. Blanton wanted to *hang* him. There was more than jealousy behind it, though that alone would have been enough. Blanton saw in the stranger a threat to his power on the range.

There was no choice. If he came out shooting they would kill her. He didn't doubt for a minute that Blanton would make good his threat.

"All right, Blanton," he shouted. "I'm coming out!"

Grim, pale beneath his tan, he shed his shooting irons. He walked to the door, shot back the bolt, pulled the door open, stepped out on the porch. The sun was low in the west. He kept himself from glancing to his right, where he knew the face with the red smear was to be seen. He saw the posse in front of the house, about thirty feet away. Two of the deputies were holding Ann, who was straining toward him. He went straight up to her, reached for one of her hands. But two of the deputies grabbed his arms and tied them behind his back. The tree for the hanging had already been picked out, over by the first corral. Larry swallowed hard.

"Ann," he said, "don't look. Don't cry. It'll be easier for me if yuh don't."

Her face was white. "They can't do it," she whispered. "They can't do it."

For an instant more he was permitted to look into her eyes. She saw a strange smile light up his face. A noose was slipped around his neck, the rope was thrown over a limb, and he was hoisted onto a barrel.

"He shore does take it calm," one of the deputies muttered.

(Continued on page 134)

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(Continued from page 133)

"He'll be calmer in a minute," came the muttered answer. "He'll be dead meat."

"Who's goin' to kick away the barrel?"

"Blanton."

Larry overheard but the strange smile did not leave his face. Suddenly he lifted his head and from his throat came the long drawn howl of a coyote. It startled the men who were about to hang him.

"Jest a sort o' farewell, boys," he said.

"Take hold!" Blanton roared, advancing to the barrel. As he lifted his heavily booted right foot the rope grew taut.

FROM the porch, sudden, more startling than the coyote cry, came the crack of a rifle, followed instantly by another. Blanton's foot was already under way when it came, and he kicked the barrel out from under—but there was no hanging. Sheriff Towers, one of the two who had had hold of the rope, was down, drilled through the heart. The other, a deputy, had doubled up, clutching both hands to his midriff. Hank Sumner was on the porch, crouched on one knee, getting ready to fire again.

For an instant the group was motionless in a kind of paralysis. Then Ann heard it, an oncoming sound. The others heard it too—a sound as of charging Comanches, the beat of swiftly rushing hoofs beneath wolf howl and coyote cry. In the confusion brought by that wild sound Rush Blanton was the first to recover. He drew one of his revolvers and sprang in close to the man he had failed to hang.

"Yuh beat the rope," he cried passionately, "but yuh'll not beat lead!"

But Ann, free, had stooped and drawn one of the dead sheriff's guns. She triggered quickly. Blanton stag-

gered, the revolver falling from his hand. Then, all at once, horsemen were in and all about them. One dismounted and with quick strokes of his bowie cut Larry's bonds, crying apologetically as he did so, "We were a little off direction, boss! The coyote howl put us right. What's been goin' on here?"

"Never mind that now," Larry snapped. "Round up this necktie party, everybody but the man on the porch. He's one of us."

The next instant Ann was in his arms. "You heard them," she murmured. "You heard them before any of us, and that's what made you smile that way."

"Yes," he admitted, "but even at that they'd 'a' been too late if it hadn't been for Hank first an' then you. Eh, Hank?"

"Shucks," said Hank Sumner, who had come up to them. "With a rifle like yores a man could hit anything he'd a mind to. Reckon I had a little sleep. Bullet creased the top o' my head. When I woke up things sounded too quiet to be healthy, so I came around front an' found yuh gone. Came out on the porch an' saw what was goin' on. Would 'a' played it safe an' got Blanton, but one o' the deps was in the way. Say, that shore is the beatin'est passel o' riders I ever did see. Yore boys, I mean. Danged if I wouldn't take 'em for Injuns. They shore do work fast—they've roped the lot o' them."

The wild horsemen were coming in at a walk, trailing their roped captives behind them. The one who had cut Larry's bonds asked: "What yuh want us to do with 'em, boss?"

"Turn 'em loose," Larry ordered, "but before yuh do, I've got somethin' to say to 'em, especially to you, Blanton. The law has come into this country. By the law I mean these men. They work for me on a share an' share alike basis. They'll be workin' for the Circle Noose for a

(Concluded on page 136)

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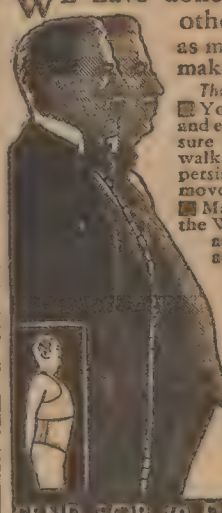

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(Concluded from page 135)

spell. Yuh've seen enough o' them to know that they're not ornery punchers. Every one of 'em is a picked man an' kin ride, rope, an' shoot five or six times better than the best o' yore own top-hands. What's more, it's worth a man's life to try to scare off any of 'em. Blanton, if yuh so much as come six inches over into this range, yuh'll be issuin' an invitation to a bullet. I

could plug yuh now, if I'd a mind to, but I'm no executioner. Git goin'."

The five that were left needed no further urging.

"Say boss," said one of the newcomers, "what in tarnation is that thing on yore shirt!"

Ann gave a cry. Larry said: "I reckon it's time, Ann." She plucked the feather off his shirt and off Hank Sumner's, and let them float to the ground. Both men looked at each other and chuckled, remembering something that had been said when they had first met on the plain.

"Boys," Larry cried, "how do yuh like yore new boss?"

"No!" Ann cried in answer as he drew her closer to his side. "You're still working for your old boss, because he'll be my boss too. You'll be working for Mr. and Mrs. Barclay."

THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB MEMBERS

Here's a list of some of the members of our rip-roaring organization of waddies and range girls, THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB. More names next month! The letter "A" in parentheses indicates that the members' age are over 18.

Helen Weskiwciez, 48 Slattery St., Wilkes Barre, Pa.
Christine John (A), Mason, West Virginia.
Wayne Palmer (A), Route 1, Humboldt, Kansas.
Lester Bucks (A), Bowers, Pa.
Rose May Moore (A), Box 105, Huntington Pk., Calif.
Jasomine Lee Taylor (A), 2413 Jerden Ave., Granite City, Illinois.
Harold Ohr (A), 257 18th Avenue, Longview, Washington.
Roy Saito (A), Sooke Lake, Sooke Lake, B. C., Can.
Joseph M. Nieradka, Jr. (A), 14 Tuttle St., Wallington, New Jersey.
Alice Moxley (A), 1127 Upham St., San Luis Obispo, Calif.
Clayt. Blackie Waterson, Owanka, S. Dakota.
S. H. Jernigan (A), Parrish, Alabama.
Jennie M. Blinkey (A), 952½ W. Broad St., Columbus, Ohio.
Stan Abramson (A), 856 21st St., San Bernardina, Cal.
Pearl Cattle (A), 87 Middle St., Randwick, Sydney, Australia, N. SW.
Mavis Jane Peterson (A), O E O. The Head, via Killarney, Q. Land.
Helen Dittman (A), Perkiomenville, Pa.
John L. Wilson (A), Co. B, 1st Inf., Fort F. E., Warren, Wyo.
Evelyn Inouye (A), Box 603, Fillmore, Calif.
R. F. C. Fred Zepeda (A), Bty A, 8th F. A., Schofield Bks., Hawaii.
Eileen Fitzgerald (A), 76 Rogers Road, Dagenham, Essex, England.
Mona Newton, Whitfield Victoria, via Wangaratto.
Mae Brown, Benjamin Tex., Texas.
Bill Whiteman (A), 734 Plum St., Vineland, N. J.
Pre Frank Waterhouse (A), 1/Bedfsahcrfs Regt., Camp, Dehra Dun, India.
Zelma M. Arnburg (A), Pleasant Field, Queens Co., N. S.
Arthur Charles Staub, R. I. Absanokee, Mont.
Joseph Barry, 132 Newell St., Pittsfield, Mass.
Ruth Lucille Davis, Ray, Ind.
Ben Stokes (A), 84 Andrews St., Hinkly Rt., Leicester, England.
Sarah Berte (A), 2164 So. 61st St., West Allis, Wis.
Henry Bernier (A), 5 Grosvenor St., Taunton, Mass.
John T. Herkel (A), 309 Iowa St., Cedar Falls, Iowa.
Milton Mutti (A), c/o Pete Schlegel, Rt. No. 2, Fort Morgan, Colorado.
Trudy Barker, 923 N. Miami Ave., Miamisburg, Ohio.
Mavin Berry (A), 61 Station Rd., Marlane Bucks, Eng.
Jane Kovarovic (A), 58 Orchard St., Gloversville, N. Y.
Norman S. Beaumont (A), 8 Bendon Ave., Waterloo Hundersfield, Yorkshire, England.
Mary Jane Dodde, Box 186, Dawson, N. Dak.
Hilda S. Funk, Route No. 1, Box 34, American Falls, Idaho.
Kermith Fuglestad (A), R. F. D. No. 2, Gonuick, Minn.
Claude E. Woods (A), 5810 Frances St., Omaha., Neb. Nebraska.
J. D. Smith (A), Co. 842, Camp F 3 A, Silver Cup, New Mexico.
Tillie Layton (A), 62 Ebener St., Redwood City, Calif.

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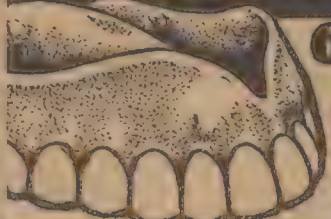

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YES, suh, folks, it's shore tough work takin' ranch-wagons an' a remuda 'crost our old cow country where ain't many roads, an' waggins has tuh keep up with th' drive an' be in camp an' grub-pile ready afore th' cowboys stops roundin' up cattle. Ef th' waggin is late or th' remuda slow gittin' handy where fellas kin rope 'em an' change tuh fresh broncs fast, cuss-words shore falls right plumb easy from them waddies' sun-blistered lips.

Makes me recollect th' time us fellas o' th' old Diamond-Cross, what's out Arizony way, was out on round-up jest afore th' winter winds was due tuh slap ag'in our Stetsons an' make us look sorta yearnin' like back to'ards where's th' home ranch an' plenty fire-wood an' blankets.

'Twas sorta slow, that Fall, 'cause th' boss, he was laid up most a month with a busted shin, got when a hoss took a header over th' rim-rock. But onct we got started, things went along fine an' nacheral, ev'body yowlin' happy an' feelin' their oats. Bein' strong an' young an' usta straddlin' broncs an' listenin' tuh a thousand white-faces bawlin' 'round brandin' fires is shore sweet music, fellas an' gals.

Bustin' Leather

Well, us fellas was all bustin' leather an' wearin' out our rawhide lariats one day, ag'in 'bout coupla thousand white-faces, an, needin' fresh broncs tuh take th' place of our'n what was plumb wore out from hard-ridin' since sun-up, an' we gits watchin' th' back-trail fer sign o' our chuck-waggin' an' our remuda, which same means our herd o' saddle hosses what allers goes along with a round-up crew.

Day was chilly, with jest a sorta flicker o' maybe snow in th' air. Was 'bout noon an' our stomicks mighty flat. A good, hot meal'd shore taste like one o' them Waldorf-Astoria grub feasts what th' boss onct took Miss Blondie an' me to.

Yuh starts with them patty-du-frogwas an' winds up with what eastern folks calls demmy tassies, an' ev'ything in between, till a fella's belt gits sorta shrunk an' his wind short'n shorter. Boss said they was gout in ev'ry dish, an' reckon he was right, fer it took Miss Blondie an 'me coupla hours walkin' round Central Park afore we could git back tuh work.

Our Remuda Was Late

But I'm tellin' yuh 'bout that time our chuck waggin an' our remuda was late—four hours late, what made it most sun-down afore us fellas got our molars achawin' on beefsteak an' spuds. Happened thisaway, come tuh find out. Our chuck-waggin busted down, six mile back, in crossin' a stream. Tongue broke, then one front wheel caved in ag'in th' strain. Hell tuh pay, 'course. Finally big John Ryan, what ain't no man ever lived better as a Simon-pure cowman from th' spurs up, said he'd lope back an' locate that waggin.

He busted away fast an' after awhile comes ridin' back, disgusted like a cowpoke what'd held a pair o' twos ag'in four aces an' tried tuh

bluff his hand. It jest cain't be done, an' John tells us gittin' that durned waggin up tuh camp cain't be did, neither, an' that we'd all have tuh go hungry till mawnin'.

Now, tellin' talk like that tuh a bunch o' achin'-bellied cowpunchers is like tellin' a gal tuh give yuh back yore ingagemint ring. Things is gonna pop, pronto.

Dude Chaney tried that on a gal onct, an' took me an' coupla o' our boys all night tuh bandage his haid, an' even then we never got back th' ring, what cost Dude four dollars an' eleven cents—jawbone.

Stuck in th Mud

Well, we talks up tuh John, what ain't no better handler o' waggins when he sets his mind tuh it. So back we rides tuh that waggin an' finds it stuck plumb in th' mud an' rocks in th' river, water most up over th' waggin's bottom an' apt tuh soak our grub any minit. Them four hosses had nuthin' but their durned haids outa th' water an' couldn't budge th' waggin a inch. Th' driver had spent all his cuss-words an' was startin' all over ag'in.

Our remuda was strayin' round, under our young Mex hoss-wrangler,

(Continued on page 140)

THRILLING RANCH STORIES
22 West 48th Street
New York

DEAR TEX: Please enroll me as a member of THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB and send me my membership identification card. I agree to be active in keeping the Branding Fire Burning.

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Address.....

City ..... State.....

Favorite Hobbies .....

..... Age .....

I am enclosing a stamped self-addressed envelope in which you are to mail my membership card.

Signed .....

Date .....

8-36

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. . . it won't cost you one cent!"

Signed: GEORGE F. JOWETT

TWO solid inches of tough, sinuous muscle added to your biceps . . . three inches to your chest . . . or it won't cost you one penny! That's my unqualified agreement!

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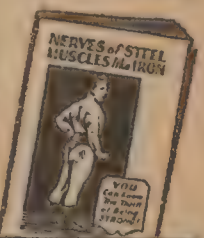

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(Continued from page 139)

Juan Bustamente, who was afeared tuh leave th' waggin 'cause th' driver was demandin' his help. Well, we jest hadda git that waggin out an' up tuh camp, so John, he flops on one wheel-hoss's back, I straddles th' other, an' other fellas mounts th' leaders, all bareback an' them broncs r'arin' hostile.

Things Happen Fast

John yells "Let'r go, ev'body!" and him an' me druv home our rowels. Th' driver roars more cuss-words, lashin' with his blacksnake whip. Th' rest of our boys waves their durned arms an' bawls advice. An' then things happens fast.

Th' hosses John an' me is on starts, buckin' higher'n hell. Th' lead broncs does th' same. Water splashes over everything. Then th' durned harness busts all tuh pieces an' us four fellas on them team hosses goes rakin' th' clouds like all gitout, harness flappin' round our laigs an' them hosses bawlin' like they was plumb loco, haids down between their front laigs.

We rolls off them broncs pronto an' lets 'em travel wherever they likes. Then we gits back tuh our own saddled broncs an' mounts up, cussin' mad, but knowin' we'd all git hell ef we showed up back in camp without th' grub an' remuda.

So we all flings our ropes at that waggin what's settled in th' streambed an, dallyin' our ropes round our saddle-horn, all yells new cusses an' makes our broncs pull—most ten of us. Thataway, we drags out th' waggin an' then John, who savvies round-up broncs an' knows they don't never like pullin' waggins, shouts fer all of us tuh keep movin' fast as we kin. Yellin', spurrin', whoopin', six-guns rarin', we shore did.

We Shore Had a Ride

Folks, we shore had a ride that time, gitting that chuck-waggin tuh camp. It was some wild time, an' when we got clost tuh camp an' seen our cattle most all quiet an' looked

like a peaceful night ahaid, durned ef th' noise of our bustin' up didn't play haywire with everything. Th' noise o' th' waggin an' th' stampedin' remuda all 'round us thataway, them cows musta figgered it warn't no good place tuh sleep, an 'they all stampeded like lightnin'.

It come midnight afore we was all back ag'in an' holdin' th' herd tight. But, folks, did we eat? Never seen no chuck-waggin so popular as that one o' ours, an' we'd drug it all them six mile with one o' its front wheels busted, too. But when th' boss's daughters rides intuh camp, John's face lit up an' I knowed romance was with us ag'in.

But they's more'n busted wheels, fellas an' gals. Sometimes it's busted hearts ayearnin' fer romance, an' us folks o' th' BRANDING FIRE CLUB ain't lettin' no hearts bust, no time. We're givin' 'em a hand, aplenty, whenever they asks it, ain't we? Shore! An' so jest lamp some o' th' swell letters we're gittin' from far an' near, an' soon's yuh crawls outa yore saddle an' gits chawin' 'round yore own chuck-waggin, grab up yore pens an' write these fine fellas an' gals good, long answers what'll warm their hearts—an' yore own.

Dear Tex:

I will drop you a line to tell you what I think of THRILLING RANCH STORIES. I know it is the best. Here's hoping you keep The Branding Fire burning bright, because I don't hanker to get lost when I join the happy circle. So keep it burning if you have to fan it with your old sombrero until I get there and I'll help you keep it blazing.

I hope you keep on giving us The Branding Fire Song Book.

I'll tell you what stories I liked best. "Arizona Ranger," "Border Ranger," "Riders of the Sage" and "Two Gun Gordon Comes Back."

I want you to find me some pen pals—I promise to answer all letters I receive, as I like to write to everyone. You had better prepare a place around The Branding Fire for me, Tex, for I sure am on my way to that bright glow.

Well, I think we are supposed to describe ourselves, so here I am. I am a girl, 18 years old, have blue grey eyes, reddish blond hair and am about 5 ft. 2 inches tall, weigh about 130 pounds.

(Continued on page 142)

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THE BEACON
22 West 48th Street Dept. 8 New York City

(Continued from page 141)

I live on a place known as the Hassafield Ranch. Lots of cattle and horses roam the many acres. My hobbies are hiking, hunting and fishing.

Three cheers for THRILLING RANCH STORIES and three for the state of good old Texas.

Adios amigos. Everyone calls me plain "Bert."

Bertha Lea Adkins.
Box 171, Tivoli, Texas.

Hyer's a letter from Australia:

Dear Tex:

I have just read a copy of THRILLING RANCH STORIES. I will be pleased if you will enroll me as a member of your Branding Fire Club.

I have no favorites in the book because they are all interesting stories.

I was born in Mackay and here I've been ever since. I am fifteen years of age on November the 2nd, 1936. My father owns a great deal of land on which he raises pigs, fowls, horses, cattle and has a plantation. We have one hundred odd head of cows. I have been amongst cattle and horses for six years and would never care to depart from them. While I have a bronc and harness I am set for a lifetime. My sister will be seventeen in August, and I do most of the cattle ranging. There are many ranges to climb up for the cattle and for the wild broncs. When it comes to the branding of horses and heifers I am never missing.

I am very anxious to hear from members of the Branding Fire Club. Yours sincerely,

Olive Baxter.
Nebia Creek, 656 Mail Route, via Dumblton, Mackay, Queensland, Australia.

Glad tuh hear that yuh like workin' with cattle and hosses so well, Olive. Yore right—ain't nothin' like a good bronc tuh make yuh feel yore on th' top o' th' world.

This is from Brooklyn, N. Y.:

Howdy Tex:

I just read your stories and think they're grand. I don't think there is a better book than THRILLING RANCH STORIES on the continent. Really, I think it's swell.

I sure would be glad to join THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB and be one of your folks, too. I'm very lonely here in a large city full of people, strange as it seems, so I'd love to have a few pen pals.

I'm very fond of all sports including horseback riding. I am 5 ft. 2½ inches tall, weigh 117 lbs., have dark brown curly hair, dark brown eyes and am even-tempered. I'm 23 years old. I'll send a photo to the

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first three of you who cares to write. Well, Tex, I'll say *adios* for now. Hoping to gain some true blue pen pals. Yours truly,

Margy Eckert.

247—58th St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Showin' that we git letters from all over th' world, hyer's a letter from way off in Arabia.

Dear Tex:

Being an airman in one of the world's outlandish places my appreciation of THRILLING RANCH STORIES is definitely 100 percent.

Having read this magazine for a long time it has occurred to me that news of this corner of the earth may be acceptable to some of your readers leading sheltered lives in the world's more civilized spots.

I am an Englishman of 21 years, 5 ft. 10 inches and weigh 155 lb., fair hair and blue eyes, so if any fellow readers would care to interchange letters, Pen Pals would be more than welcome. Cheerio,

Bob Willoughby.

R. Willoughby, Royal Air Force,
Khormaksar, Aden Arabia.

Reckon yore shore right when yuh say that some of the folks 'round the fire will be interested in hearin' what yuh have tuh tell them 'bout Arabia, Bob. And it's mighty good tuh hear that yuh like THRILLING RANCH STORIES so well. And now, hyer's a letter from out in Arkansas.

Dear Tex:

I have been reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES for a long long time. I think it is the best book on the newsstands. There is never a story that I don't like. I like the songs, too.

Say, Tex, I'm looking for some pen pals and I wish you would help me find some. I will try and tell you what I look like. I am a boy 20 years old. Have dark brown hair and blue eyes. I am 5 ft. 8 inches tall, weigh 135 lbs., and am just a happy-go-lucky kid from Arkansas looking for a load of pen pals, so come on and write to a lonesome guy. All that send their pictures I will send a surprise.

So long to you, Tex.

Clifton Collins.

Route 4, Rosston, Arkansas.

Thanks, Cliff. Mighty nice tuh know that yuh like every story in the book so well.

Now, ain't them jest top-hand, folks? Shore is nice tuh read how ev'ybody's likin' our BRANDING

FIRE CLUB and THRILLING RANCH STORIES. Shows we got a top-hand boss, too, who knows his bacon an' beans—an' what yuh-all likes in way o' stories writ by fellas what's top-handers theirselves.

When I sits yere, alookin' 'round these offises an' seein' ev'rybody workin' tuh beat th' band, clawin' over th' hundreds o' stories what comes rompin' in ev'ry day, an' knowin' how they've all gotta be read through an' selections made, makes me scratch my old haid wonderin' how come th' good Lawd give our boss, th' brains what's necessary tuh pick out th' best for yuh—like he allers does. Onct in a while I hears some fella say he don't think editors reads all th' stories folks sends in tuh 'em. Yeah? Well, folks, lemme tell yuh. I got good sight an' hearin', an' I watches clost, an' ain't a durned yarn what hits

(Concluded on page 144)

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(Concluded from page 143)

this corral that ain't read complete an' by several. That's how come we're givin' yuh th' top cream off th' bucket, every issue.

An' jest wait till yuh sees our next number. I'm tellin' yuh, fellas an' gals. Never was none yuh'll like more. Yo're gonna read WOLVES OF THE RANGE, a novel by Eugene A. Clancy an' THE GREY RIDER, a novelette by Alan M. Emley, with a punch in every line, with a heap o' others jest as swell, what'll make yuh spur hard tuh reach yore newsstand on time an' git yoreself a copy before all's sold out.

An' jest tuh show our boss how yuh feel, fill out an' mail in th' coupon on page 139, with a self-addressed an' stamped envelope, an' we'll mail right back tuh yuh yore membership card as a member of our BRANDING FIRE CLUB, what'll make yuh one of us from then on. Then yuh kin toss yore Stetson on our hat-pile, dig yore heels intuh th' sand 'round our BRANDING FIRE an' call yoreself a pal among pals. We'll help yuh unroll yore soogans right 'longside of ours, an' we'll help yuh smoke up whatever terbacco yuh lugs along, shore thing.

Well, adios again, amigos, fer 'nother month. I'll be waitin' fer yuh, an' mighty glad when we foregathers onct more tuh jabber our yarns. Be seein' yuh, everybody!

—TEX BROWN.

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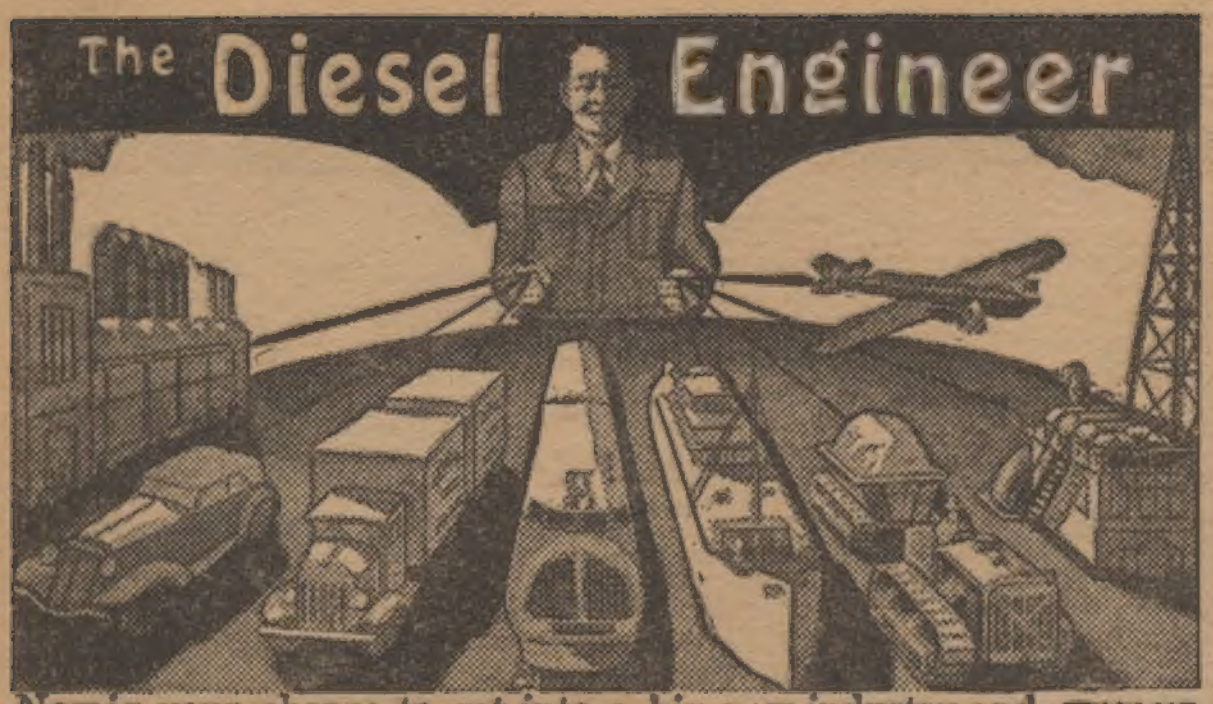

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G. F. Pegram, Texas, clears $315 in his first 5 days in this business. J. C. May, Connecticut, cleared $262.35 in 9 days. E. Foyer, Calif., makes $4,920 in 3 months' time. C. W. Ferrell, Ohio, writes: "My earnings have run well above $1,000 in a month's time"—he has made over 1,000 sales, paying him $5 to $60 profit each sale. J. Clarke Baker, Connecticut, sells 13 firms in 3 days' time, netting $151.71 clear profit—over $50 a day profit. Writes that 9 of these 13 firms are already using seconds or third repeat refill orders. And so on. These men had never sold this item before they came with us! How could they enter a field totally new to them and earn such remarkable sums in these desperate times? Read the answer in this announcement. Read about a new business that does away with the need for high pressure selling. A rich field that is creating new money-making frontiers for wide-awake men. Those who enter now will pioneer—to them will go the choicest opportunities.

FOUR $15 SALES DAILY PAY $280 WEEKLY

INSTALLING NEW BUSINESS SPECIALTY ON FREE TRIAL—MAKING TREMENDOUS CASH SAVINGS IN OPERATING COSTS FOR THOUSANDS OF CONCERNS THROUGHOUT THE U. S. AND CANADA

$4,707 Returns For One Kansas Store in Three Months

Sanders Bidgway, of Kansas, invests $88.60 and shows returns of $4,707.00 between April 5th and June 29th! Bowser Lumber and Feed Co., West Virginia, invests $15, reports returns well over $1,000.00! Fox Ice and Coal Co., Wisconsin, returns $3,564.00! Baltimore Sporting Goods Store invests $45, returns $1,600.00! Pollom & Son, Indiana, in 45 days turned $15 installation into $2,250.00 cash. With these and scores of similar results to display, our representatives interest business men from the very smallest to the very largest. No one can dispute the proof in the photo-copies of actual letters which our men show.

COMPLETE TRAINING FURNISHED

Many men with us today started at scratch, many coming out of clerking jobs, many out of small businesses, some out of large concerns. We teach you every angle of the business. We hand you the biggest money-making business of its kind in the country. You try out this business ABSOLUTELY WITHOUT RISKING A DOLLAR OF YOUR OWN. Can't possibly tell you all in the limited space available here. Mail the coupon now for full information — nothing to risk, everything to gain.

Brilliant Record of Success

As well as selling thousands of installations to small merchants, professional men, etc., we number either the parent companies, or branches, or dealers, etc., of many world-famed concerns among our customers: Cities Service Oil Co., National Majestic Radio, Chevrolet, Chrysler, Public Utilities Consolidated Corp., United Aluminum Corp., Street Railways Advertising Co., Great American Life Underwriters, and scores of others nationally known. Universities, newspapers, doctors, etc., buy substantial installations and heavy repeat orders.

Customer Guaranteed Cash Profit

Customer gets signed certificate guaranteeing cash profit on his investment. Very few business men are so foolish as to turn down a proposition guaranteed to pay a profit, with proof from leading concerns that it does pay.

Portfolio of References from America's Leading Concern

is furnished you. A handsome, impressive portfolio that represents every leading type of business and profession. You show immediate, positive proof of success. Immediately forestalls the argument, "Doesn't fit my business." Shows that it does fit, and does make good. Closes the deal.

Rush the Coupon for Full Information—Territory Filled in Order of Application

If you are looking for a man-size business, free from worries of other overcrowded lines of work, get in touch with us at once. Learn the possibilities now before the franchise for your territory is closed. This specialty is as important a business opportunity today as the typewriter, adding machine and dictaphone were in their early days. Don't lose valuable time, and let this slip away from you. Use the coupon for convenience. It will bring you full information and our proposition immediately.

NO HIGH PRESSURE SIMPLY INSTALL—LET IT SELL ITSELF

Here is a business offering an invention so successful that we make it sell itself. Our representatives simply tell what they offer, show proof of success in every line of business and every section of the country. Then install the specialty without a dollar down. It starts working at once, producing a cash return that can be counted like the other cash register money. The customer sees with his own eyes a big, immediate profit on his proposed investment. Usually he has the investment, and his profit besides, before the representative returns. The representative calls back, collects his money. OUT OF EVERY $75 BUSINESS THE REPRESENTATIVE DOES, NEARLY $60 IS HIS OWN PROFIT! THE SMALLEST HE MAKES IS $5 ON A $7.50 SALE! Our men are making sales running into the hundreds. They are getting the attention of the largest concerns in the country and selling to the smaller businesses by the thousands. You can get exclusive rights. **Business is GOOD in this line, in small towns or big cities alike! It's on the boom now. Get in while the business is young!**

F. E. ARMSTRONG, President, Dept. 4047-H, Mobile, Ala.

MAIL FOR FULL INFORMATION

F. E. ARMSTRONG, Pres., Dept. 4047-H, Mobile, Ala.

Without obligation to me, send full information on your proposition.

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Street or Route .....

Box No. .....

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TALK–SING–PLAY thru your own radio

BROADCAST your voice on programs coming through your radio set--make announcements from any part of house--inject wise cracks, josh and mystify friends. **"World Mike"** made especially for home use, attached in a jiffy. **Not a Toy.** Also put on own programs at home, parties, club affairs. Barrels of fun! Easy to operate.

PRICE 25c POSTPAID
Johnson Smith & Co.
Dept. 534, DETROIT

CRYSTAL RADIO 25c

This is a radio in itself, as it is possible to get reception with it alone within 25 miles of a station (or up to 100 miles under good conditions). All you need is an aerial & earphone. Completely assembled and wired, with supersensitive crystal, stand, base, crystal cup, arm with cats whisker, etc. Reception guaranteed. **Only 25c ppd.**

RADIO BOOK

Tells how to make inexpensive crystal sets, electric sets, short wave radios, etc. Get foreign stations, police calls, etc. **Only 10c, ppd.**

LEARN TO VAMP

Play The Piano Without Lessons

Would you like to play the piano or organ without going through the drudgery of learning the scales and keys and without tedious practice? The **Vamping Tutor** is a greatly simplified method, which, after a little practice, enables you to play the accompaniment to any tune or song written in any "time" or in any "key." No knowledge of music necessary. Once you have mastered the system, you will be able to play the accompaniment to songs, ballads, waltzes, the latest hits, etc., entirely by ear without any music. **Price 12 cents postpaid.**

10c HOW TO LOVE

Every nomal being is susceptible to love's tender passion. When love comes the lovers realize how inadequate is the language at their command to express the depths of the consuming passion that is gnawing at their hearts. It is to soothe the souls of the love lorn that this work has been compiled. Read this work and profit! **Price 10c postpaid.** *Big novelty catalog 10 cents.*

FRENCH PHOTO RING 25c

A handsome ring, finished in imitation platinum, and set with a large imitation diamond. In the shank of the ring is a small microscopic picture almost invisible to the naked eye, yet magnified to an almost incredible degree. Pictures of bathing girl beauties, French actresses, views of France, Panama Canal, others show the Lord's Prayer, every word legible. **Only 25c ppd.**

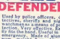
LOOK WONDERFUL INSTRUMENT 35c

Nine separate articles in one. Odd, curious and interesting. Lots of pleasure as well as very useful. Double Microscope for examining the wonders of nature. Opera Glass, Stereoscope, Burning Lens, Reading Glass, Telescope, Compass, Pocket Mirror, and Laryngoscope for examining eye, ear, nose and throat. Worth its cost to locate one painful cinder in the eye. Folds flat and fits the pocket. Something great--you need one. Don't miss it. **Only 35c ppd.**

Good Luck RING

Very striking, quaint and uncommon. Oxidized gunmetal finish; skull and crossbones design; two brilliant flashing imitation rubies or emeralds sparkle out of the eyes. Said to bring good luck to the wearer. **PRICE 25c Postpaid**

HOME BREWED WINES & BEERS



Over 100 simple recipes for making all kinds of good, wholesome wines, beers, champagnes, brandies, gin, rum, whiskey, cordials and simple liquors, fruit syrups, etc. **Only 10 cents postpaid.**

SILENT DEFENDER

Used by police officers, detectives, sheriffs and night watchmen as a means of protection. Very effective. Easily fits the hand. Useful in an emergency. Made of aluminum, weight 2 oz. Always ready for use--pocket size. **25c each, 2 for 45c ppd.**

SNAPPY JOKES

A big collection of rich and rare jokes by a jolly bartender for stag parties, smokers, etc. Good clean humor--not a dull page in the whole book. Don't be a clam in company. Get a copy before your friend does. Costs but a dime, but contains a dollar's worth of fun. Hundreds of jokes and illustrations. **Price 10 cents postpaid. RED HOT JOKE BOOK, 10c postpaid.** *Catalog 10c.*

TOY MAKER 10c

Greatest boys' book written. How to make a Camera, Canoe, model Railroad, Telephone, Boomerang, Telegraph set, Kite, Microscope, Motor, Water Wheel, Paddle Raft, Skis, Dog Sled, etc. 150 illustrations. **Price 10c.**

MOTTO RINGS

Lots of harmless fun and amusement wearing these rings. Make the girls sit up and take notice! Made in platinoid finish (resembles platinum), with wording on enameloid as illustrated. **25c each ppd.**

ELECTRIC EYE 25c

PHOTO-ELECTRIC CELL

The **Electric Eye**--Photocell--is one of the latest scientific discoveries that has many practical uses. A flash of light opens a garage, window, door, turns lights on or off, stops or starts a motor, etc. Used in all television sets. The miracle with a million uses! No experimentor, no inventor (and who isn't?) should be without this latest scientific novelty. Can also be used to amuse and delight people by creating weird effects. Lights go off, doors bang, with a flash of light. **Electric Eye, only 25c postpaid. Supersensitive Electric Eye,** better quality, **50 cents postpaid.**

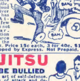
TELEGRAPH SET

A Private Electric Telegraph Set for only **15c!** Use it as a practice set or send messages to friends (sending and receiving). Learn the Code easily and quickly. Be an expert operator. Key, sounder, magnet, etc. mounted on wooden base, complete with Western Union blanks, code and instructions, (without battery). **ALL FOR 15c**

The Boy Electrician 10c

Add 10c for 64 page book all about electricity written specially for boys. Tells how to make batteries, dynamos, motors, radios, telegraph apparatus telephones, lights, electric bells, alarms, coils, electric engines. **PRICE 10c ppd.**

AUTO SCARE BOMB



The Auto Bomb is attached to the motor of your car, one wire to the spark plug and the other wire to any part of the motor. The instant your "victim" steps on the starter, there is a shrill whistle, followed by a loud bang. The driver thinks his car has exploded. Attached in a few seconds. Does not harm the car. More protection than an insurance policy--catches the thief in the act. **Price 15c each, 3 for 40c. $1.35 per doz. Shipped by Express. Not Prepaid.**

JU-JITSU

DON'T BE BULLIED

The Japanese art of self-defense. New methods of attack and defense are given, illustrated so that you cannot fail to understand them. Deals fully with trips, throws, wrist locks, body holds, defense against revolvers, strangling, armlocks, scissors, splits, head lock, holding a man down, double knee throw, stick attack, defense against knife, one hand throat grip, defense against two assailants, stomach throw, secret thumb knockout, nerve pinches, and numerous others. Learn to protect yourself under all circumstances with nature's weapons. Fear no man, guns or knives! **"Science of Ju Jitsu" Only 30 cents postpaid.**

LEARN TO HYPNOTIZE

See how easily you can master the secrets of Hypnotism. Master this strange power. Sway others at will. Learn to use this mysterious power to influence the thoughts of others, control their desires; and make you master of every situation. Make others love you, strengthen your will power, banish fear and worry, improve your memory, overcome bad habits, etc. Everything explained in new book. **PRICE 25 CENTS POSTPAID.**

WHOOPEE CUSHION

Whoopee Cushion is made of rubber, inflated like a balloon, and then placed on a chair, couch, seat, etc. When the victim unsuspectingly sits upon the cushion, it gives forth noises that can be better imagined than described. **Price 25c.**

MAGIC FLUTE

10c

New patented musical instrument. Wonderful invention; nothing like it. You can be a real musician and play all the latest popular songs, ragtimes, old time ballads, sacred hymns, dance music; also fine for piano accompaniment. There is no fingering, and once you have mastered it you can play all kinds of music with facility and ease. Sure to please. **Price 10c, 3 for 25c ppd.**

DANCING SKELETON

10c pd.

A jointed figure of a skeleton 14 in. in height, will dance to music and perform various gyrations and movements while the operator may be some distance from it. It will lie down, stand up, dance, etc. We send full and complete instructions. **Price 10 cents. 3 for 25 cents postpaid.**

IRWIN PROJECTOR

A real Electric **Movie Machine** for only **50c!** Shows bright, clear pictures about 14 x 18 inches in size. Just insert the film, turn the crank and watch the pictures as long as you like! Uses 2 flashlight cells obtainable anywhere. Bright red enameled steel case, measuring 5x3x3 inches. Complete with bulb, ready to use. Takes 16 mm. film. Batteries not included. **Price 50c postpaid. FILM,** your choice of Felix the Cat, Wild West, Mutt & Jeff, Tom Mix, etc., **15c each.**

HOW TO TAP DANCE

PRICE 25c

Why envy the easy rhythm and fascinating grace of Step'n Fetchit, Fred Astaire etc. Tap dance in ONLY 6 HOURS by a new, simplified course by Prof. Wilson. No special ability needed. Be smart! Everybody's tapping. The whole town is tapping. Beat out a tune with your feet. Hostesses love it. Friends adore it. Besides, tap dancing is not only invigorating and entertaining but is also health-giving exercise for making the limbs supple and giving a "springy" feeling of fitness to the whole body. Promotes slimness nature's way, without pills, drugs or dieting. Readers say: ". . wonderful benefit. Thank you for adding tap dancing to my accomplishments." **PRICE 25 CENTS POSTPAID.**

ELECTRIC MOTOR

5000 Revolutions per Minute

RUNS ON NO. 6 DRY BATTERY

All parts necessary for ONLY 10c

5c extra for postage

An Electric Motor for 10c. Sounds almost unbelievable but it is perfectly true. We send all the parts packed in a neat box, with full instructions for assembling. No trouble at all putting it together--it is FUN. Takes but a few minutes. And OH BOY! Isn't it speedy! Runs on a No. 6 or similar dry battery. You can learn more about a motor in 30 minutes than by hours of study. Perform many novel and interesting experiments with it. **Price 10c; postage 5c extra.**

ROCKET SHIPS!

Step into the future with a Rocket Ship of your own! **Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon** use them. Be centuries ahead of anybody in your neighborhood. Several kinds: rocket planes, rocket cars or rocket boats. Complete plans are in book form. Rockets require only about an hour to build from inexpensive materials obtainable at your druggist or chemical supply company. Will go far at high speeds! **Price 10c postpaid.**

BOYS! BOYS! BOYS! THROW YOUR VOICE

Into a trunk, under the bed or anywhere. Lots of fun fooling teacher, policeman or friends. The **VENTRILO** a little instrument, fits in the mouth out of sight, used with above for Bird Calls, etc. Anyone can use it. **Never fails. A 64 page course on Ventriloquism together with the Ventrilo. All for only 10 cents postpaid.**

JAPANESE ROSE BUSHES

The Wonder of the World

10 Cts.

Japanese Rose Bushes **bloom all the year round.** Just think of it. Six weeks after planting the seed, the plants will be in **full bloom.** It may not seem possible, but we positively **guarantee it to be so.** They will **bloom every ten weeks,** Summer or Winter, and when three years old the bush will be a **mass of roses,** bearing from five hundred to a thousand roses on each bush. The flowers are in three shades--white, pink, and crimson. The plants do well both in and outdoors. We guarantee at least three bushes to grow from each packet of seed. **Price 10c** packet, 3 pkts. for only **25c postpaid.**

250 Magic Tricks

An excellent little book containing 250 Parlor Tricks, tricks with cards, coins, handkerchiefs, eggs, rings, glasses, etc. So simple that a child can perform them. Profusely illustrated. Entertain and amuse everybody. **Only 10c postpaid.**

STAGE MONEY

With a bunch of these bills, it is easy for a person of limited means to appear prosperous by flashing a roll of these bills at the proper time and peeling off a genuine bill or two from the outside of the roll. The effect created will be found to be all that can be desired. **Prices, postpaid: 40 Bills 20c, 120 for 50c, or $3.50 per thousand postpaid.**

Hands Up! Pistol Cigarette Case 25c

It looks like a deadly weapon, but it is merely a novel Cigarette Case. Better than the real thing in many an awkward encounter. Great fun "sticking up" your friends. They squirm and protest. Pull the trigger and the slide flies open, disclosing the cigarettes. **PRICE 25c ppd.** *Catalog 10c*

DANCING

25 Cents

LATEST STEPS. Be popular. Good dancers are always admired--always popular guests. Partners welcome them eagerly. The newest, smartest steps without a teacher. Don't make excuses when the music starts. Get lots of fun from parties and dances. If you want to become a perfect dancer, learn to dance at home this new, easy way. **BOOK TELLS:** How to develop poise and control, improve your dance steps, art of holding, how to walk to music, how to lead, latest Fox Trot steps, Natural and Reverse Turns, the Reverse Wave, the Quickstep, swaying to music, Waltz, Backward Changes, the Continental, the famous Kiss dance, the Manhattan, the College Rhumba, the Carlo, Charleston, and many others. **Art Of Dancing, Price 25 Cents Postpaid.**

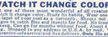
BLANK CARTRIDGE PISTOL

REVOLVER STYLE

25c 50c $1.00

Three new models now out, 25c, 50c and $1.00. Well made and effective. Patterned after latest type of Revolver. Appearance alone will scare a burglar. Takes 22 Cal. Blank Cartridges obtainable everywhere. Great protection against burglars, tramps, dogs. Have it lying around without the danger attached to other revolvers. Fine for 4th of July, New Year's, stage work, starting pistol, etc. **Small size 25c. Medium size 50c. Large size $1.00. Blank cartridges 50c per 100. Holster (cowboy type) 50c. Shipped by Express only, not prepaid.**

CHAMELEON 25c



WATCH IT CHANGE COLOR!

Get one of these most wonderful of all creatures. Watch it change color. Study its habits. Wear one on the lapel of your coat as a curiosity. Shoots out its tongue to catch flies and insects for food. No trouble to keep. Can go for months without food. About 4 in. long. Shipped to any address in U.S.A. by mail. We guarantee safe arrival and live delivery. **Only 25c ppd.**

BIG ENTERTAINER

826 Jokes & Riddles, 26 Tricks, 16 Parlor Games, 73 Toasts, 13 Stories, 105 Money-making Secrets, 22 Monologs, 21 Puzzles, Problems, Comic Recitations, Funny Readings, 11 Parlor Pastimes, 13 Flirtations, 1110 Names & their Meanings, 10 Picture Puzzles, 37 Amusing Experiments, Deaf and Dumb Alphabet, Shadowgraphy, Fortune Teller, Fortune with Cards, Crystal, Tea Cup, etc. Hypnotism, Ventriloquism, Cut-outs for Checkers, Chess, Dominoes Fox and Geese, 9 Men Morris, Spanish Prison Puzzle Anagrams, 26 Card Tricks, Crystal Gazing and 10 other things **for only 15 cents postpaid.**

125 CARD TRICKS

Contains all the tricks and deceptions with cards ever invented, including the tricks of the most celebrated Conjurors, Magicians and Prestidigitators. Simplified and adapted for home amusement and social entertainments. Complete exposure of all the card tricks by gamblers. How "skin" gamblers cheat and win money by their infernal "palm fling," and other tricks. **Price 25 cents postpaid.**

MERRY WIDOW HANKY

A perfect model of the most necessary lingerie garment worn by ladies, which, when folded and worn in the pocket, has the appearance of being a gentleman's handkerchief. A clever, funny joke. **Price 15 cents postpaid.**

STEAM ENGINE 25c

World's biggest value in mechanical toys. A great big steam engine, 7 inches high by 2 1-2 inches in diameter. Watch it run, too! It's fun to see the fly wheel spin around and hear the engine puffing when you get the "steam up." Just light up, fill the boiler with water and in a few minutes the engine is blazing along at top speed! Runs for hours on one filling and will drive many small toys off the fly wheel. Foolproof, harmless, fully tested and guaranteed to run. The engine is beautifully lithographed in several colors. Easily worth a dollar. New model which runs on alcohol or canned heat **only 25c, add 10c for postage and packing.** *Electric Model, 35c plus 10c for postage and packing.*

BUILD THIS LIE DETECTOR

GUILTY OR INNOCENT OF MURDER? No fingerprints left behind, no witnesses, no evidence except the convincing report of the LIE DETECTOR. It said **he lied!** Read this true story how a cold-blooded murderer might have gone free, if it were not for the lie detector. Make the LIE DETECTOR yourself and see if anybody is lying. This lie detector works the same as those used in banks, trials, etc. Complete instructions for making the **Lie Detector,** and actual, true cases it has solved, **only 25 cents postpaid.**

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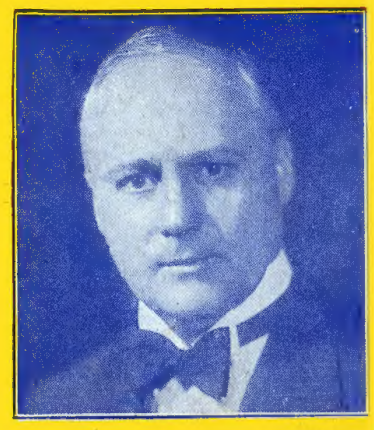
A copy of our NEW CATALOG mailed on receipt of 10c, or the De Luxe Edition with cloth binding 25c. Bigger and better than ever. Only book of its kind in existence. Nearly 600 pages of the latest tricks in magic, the newest novelties, puzzles, games, sporting goods, rubber stamps, unusual and interesting books, curiosities in seeds and plants, etc., unprocurable elsewhere. *Stamps Accepted.*

THIS REVELATION WILL STARTLE MEN PAST 40!



But It May Bring Years of Comfort To Their Lives!

HAVE you lost much of your strength? Do you suffer from pains in back and elsewhere. Are you forced to get up 2 to 10 times at night? Are you a victim of nervousness, fatigue, dizziness, mental depression, chronic constipation, sciatica, so-called bladder weakness. Many men past 40 often mistake these ailments for symptoms of approaching old age.

The True Meaning of a Tiny Gland

Science has found that these ailments in men past 40 are often due to Prostate Gland congestion or enlargement. This tiny gland becomes swollen and fails to function. Unless corrected it will likely grow worse. The result is often wretched old age or perhaps grave surgery.

Science has now perfected an amazing drugless home treatment used and endorsed by physicians and sanitariums. It goes directly to the area of the prostate gland, relieving congestion, increasing circulation, toning and stimulating. Many users report relief almost over night.

100,000 Men Have Found Answer

They have been shown the secret of better health and strength in keeping this tiny vital prostate gland active at the period in many men's lives when it becomes congested or inflamed.

FREE if You Act Now!

The results of this new method are so startling that the manufacturer will let you test it on 7 days' Free Trial. If it doesn't make you feel ten years younger in 7 days — it will cost you nothing. Mail the coupon for details and Free Copy of "Why Many Men Are Old at 40." It tells amazing facts that may prove priceless to you. No obligation.

If you live West of the Rockies, address The Electro Thermal Co., 500 Wm. Fox Building, Dept. 12-M, Los Angeles, Cal. In Canada, address the Electro Thermal Co., Desk 12-M, 53 Yonge St., Toronto, Canada.

W. J. KIRK, President,
THE ELECTRO THERMAL CO.
1205 Morris Ave., Steubenville, Ohio.

Send details of Free Trial and Free Copy of "Why Many Men Are Old at 40." No cost or obligation.

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